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#334
AUGUST 2019

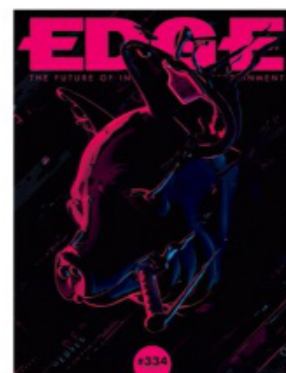
Tea and biscuits, jellied eels and a couple little trinkets

At this time of year, the global game industry typically turns its attention to the United States: as we put the finishing touches to this issue, we're also preparing to board our flight to E3. Despite that – or is it because of it? – there's a distinctly UK flavour to this month's **Edge**.

So much of the modern-day British identity, or at least the discussion around it, is about nostalgia. But there's nothing of the sort to be found here. In Studio Profile we visit SIE London: while it has never enjoyed the profile (or investment) of the more renowned names in the PlayStation studio family, it's always thrown itself with gusto at whatever mad new tech Sony cooks up. It made *EyePet* for the PlayStation Eye; *Wonderbook* for PS Move; and PSVR launch essential *PlayStation VR Worlds*. All three of those have fed into the creation of *Blood & Truth*, a grime-soundtracked gangland shootout set across modern-day London.

Meanwhile, in An Audience With... we speak to Siobhan Reddy, studio director of Media Molecule, that most British of developers. *Dreams*, currently in early access, takes the love of user-generated content that has become the Molecule calling card to dizzying new heights. It's been a huge challenge for the studio to overcome, and all the while it's quietly been setting new standards behind the scenes, becoming one of the most diverse game-development studios on the planet.

It's been a while since we've put a Union Jack on the cover of **Edge**. The game that graces page one this month is being made 3,500 miles away in Toronto, yet *Watch Dogs Legion* is a very British game, and not just because of its setting. It explores, among other things, our collective ability to see the lighter side of even the darkest of situations. And what dark times they are: a near-future dystopia that's made even more discomfiting by how plausible it all seems. If only its central mechanical hook – that you can take control of any character in the world – were real. We might stand a chance of sorting out this sorry mess. The story begins on p58.



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Printed in the UK by William Gibbons & Sons on behalf of Future. Distributed by Marketforce, 2nd Floor, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London E14 5HU.

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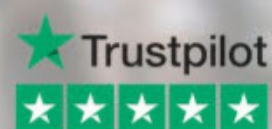




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KNOWLEDGE
NEXT-GEN VR





Index reflects Valve's fondness for modders. Behind the front panel sits a USB expansion port; developer tools and sample code are also promised



Mighty real

Hands on, and eyes in, with the dazzling new wave of **virtual reality hardware**



The race is on to define the future of virtual reality, and two very different philosophies of what that should entail are in play. On the one hand is Valve, driving for fidelity, believing that for VR to truly succeed it should look and feel as close to actual reality as possible. On the other is Oculus who, no doubt influenced by its parent Facebook, is all about mainstream appeal, keeping costs low and inconveniences to a minimum in a bid to get VR in front of as many people as it can. That both companies should take their biggest steps to date towards their very different goals by releasing new hardware within weeks of each other is surely no coincidence. The next generation of virtual reality has begun.

Valve's offering, the somewhat prosaically named Index, finally sees it enter the hardware market on its own terms; since launching SteamVR in 2015 it has delegated that side of things to HTC, maker of the Vive line of HMDs. Prior to that, its Steam

Machines range of small-form-factor PCs was similarly manufactured by companies with experience of that sort of thing. Yet nothing about Index suggests the work of a debutant. This is premium stuff – and priced to match, with the full kit priced up at £999. That can be reduced, with cheaper bundles available without the 'base station' sensors (it's compatible with Vive's) or the Index controllers.

That said, we recommend not skimping: the Index controllers are the most advanced VR input devices on the market, their array of 87 sensors per controller able to track individual finger movements. An ingenious strap running across your knuckles tethers the main body to your hand, meaning you can let go of it entirely. Software support is a little thin at the time of writing – we're assured that will change

in the run-up to launch on June 28 – but Valve provides a fine case study in the witty, playful *Aperture Hand Labs*.

While we wait, the real star is the headset itself. While the resolution may not sound like a generational leap – 1600x1440 per eye, the same as last year's Vive Pro – Valve claims the full-

RGB panels it uses have more subpixels than an OLED display, while a drive for increased sharpness, both in static and moving images, is just one of several innovations aimed at making it easier to play games in VR for long periods. Others include an increase in framerate

from Vive's 90Hz to 120Hz, with an experimental 144Hz mode also supported; a thunderous off-ear speaker system; and a significantly wider field of vision than Vive (experience varies by user but averages around 20°).

Two very different philosophies of what the future of virtual reality should entail are in play



Oculus is marketing Quest with greater fervour than previous headsets. It's working, too – as we send to press, many UK stockists are sold out

In concert, the effect is remarkable. The FOV bump feels immediately vital to roomscale VR, strengthening the sense of being in a real place; without the constant, telltale weight of a pair of headphones over your ears, audio feels ambient, rather than artificial. The VR music game *Beat Saber* feels, on other platforms, like you're standing in a corridor wearing headphones. Through Index it's like you're throwing shapes in the middle of the greatest dancefloor on the planet.

Albeit one in which you are tethered by a wire. The cost of all this power is that you are still bound to your rig, and as with Vive, it is Index's biggest immersion-killer. Sometimes it's the weight of it, or the brush of it against your body; at others it's the tangle round your ankle that forces you to turn 270° to the left instead of 90° to the right. Valve is working from the belief that it should get the tech, and comfort, right before it moves on to ease of use. Fair enough. Oculus thinks differently.

Not that Quest, released in May starting at just £399, skimps on the tech side of things: its panels are the same resolution per eye as Index, and it's a more than capable performer. Sure, it's immediately clear that it can't match Index for raw grunt, but at less than half the price you wouldn't expect it to – and in any case, it's not its USP. The only wire in the box is the one you charge the headset with. This is fully wireless roomscale VR, wherever and whenever you want.

The setup process is a dream, done almost entirely on a smartphone app (you need to briefly don the headset to find a PIN during the pairing process) through which you can also download and install games. A generous suite of demos comes preinstalled, and there's room for plenty of downloads on the in-built 64GB hard drive (an extra £100 bumps that to 128GB). The use case is immediately clear, and quite irresistible. This is a device to be managed remotely and popped on for

a quick session as and when you feel like it – brilliantly, an auto-wakeup feature brings the headset out of standby when you draw near to it.

Both headsets represent a tremendous leap forward for virtual reality, and the fact there is no clear winner means that the real victor is the medium as a whole. Ever since Palmer Luckey taped the first Rift prototype together in his parents' garage, VR has been about solving problems: of latency and motion sickness, of comfort, price and ease of use. Now the sector's two biggest players are working at the extremes of the two biggest remaining problems – of making it feel real, and making it mainstream – it is only a matter of time before they meet in the middle, at which point we will really be in business. For now, there is no right or wrong decision, merely a matter of personal circumstance and preference. The biggest mistake you could make right now is not to buy either. VR's time may finally have come. ■

DIGITAL LOVE

The Index setup process is a little more straightforward than our first time hooking up the launch-model Vive in E292. Back then, positioning the base stations was our main bugbear; now, the cables have more slack, the sensors no longer need to look down on you from on high, and screw-in stands (that also function as wall mounts) offer easier and more stable positioning. Quest's smartphone setup takes minutes, but both end up in much the same place: each has a cheery tutorial that's mostly about picking things up and flinging them around.

Smokestack lightning

How Middlesbrough reclaimed its post-industrial landscape and **embraced a digital future**

This street, **Tom Beardsmore** tells us, used to be “an alley of prostitutes and drugs.” The CEO of Sunderland-based developer and publisher Coatsink is talking about a road that runs alongside the train tracks near the top of the high street in Middlesbrough; beyond it there was once a post-industrial wasteland, framed by the flare stacks of the chemical plants beside the River Tees. This area inspired the opening shot of *Blade Runner*, Beardsmore points out. “And it literally looked like that.”

Crossing the train tracks into this part of town was known locally as ‘going over the border’. But the past decade or so has seen the area undergo a turnaround, thanks in part to Middlesbrough’s DigitalCity project. “It’s completely transformed now,”

Beardsmore tells us. “And if they go ahead with all these building projects, it’s going to transform even more. It’s amazing.”

Daniel Watson

manages what’s become known as the Boho Zone, seven buildings that are the heart of Middlesbrough’s fast-growing digital sector. Coatsink started here before moving to bigger offices in Sunderland, and it’s currently the home of indie studios including Double Eleven, SockMonkey and Cardboard Sword, plus app developers and other digital firms. Watson says DigitalCity has supported over 700 start-ups, and over 800 digital businesses, throughout the region.

It’s a heartening success story for the Northeast, an area that has the highest unemployment rate in the UK and suffered terribly through the decline of the steel and coal industries. And naturally, everyone wants to be associated with DigitalCity’s good fortune. “If you ask who started

DigitalCity, you’ll get at least ten different names,” Watson says. “Everybody’s trying to credit themselves with creating it.”

The initiative originated from nearby Teesside University 14 years ago as a way to kickstart the careers of its graduates: Watson estimates that 90 per cent of Middlesbrough-based digital companies have a link of some kind with the university. The institution has made a name for itself through its game-design courses and already has its own incubation space for start-ups, but “you got to the point where the companies that were incubated within the university didn’t necessarily have a future home,” Watson says. That led to the construction of Boho One, the flagship building of the new Boho Zone.

Boho One was purpose-built with digital businesses in mind, offering ultra-fast broadband and 24/7 access, as well as an accompanying block of flats, Boho House, that offers a live/work space with a dedicated office.

DigitalCity also provides a fellowship grant to help developers get off the ground. Beardsmore and **Paul Crabb**, Coatsink’s chief design officer, each received £4,000 to cover their living expenses while they were getting the company up and running in Boho One. “They also provided mentorship,” Crabb says. “They had some really good people to teach us about the general setting up and running of a business.” **Olly Bennett**, CEO of Cardboard Sword, lauds the benefits of being surrounded by like-minded, creative people: “There’s a real sense of community, of people knowing each other, knowing about start-ups.”



TOP **Tom Beardsmore**,
CEO, Coatsink
ABOVE **Olly Bennett**,
CEO, Cardboard Sword

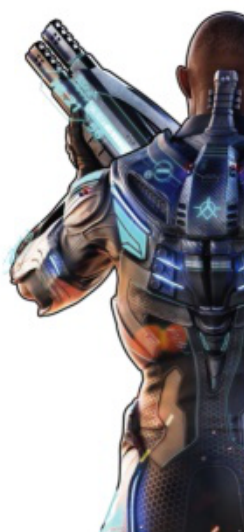


If anything, DigitalCity may have become *too* successful. “One of the issues that we have at the moment is space,” Watson says. “We have seven buildings within the Boho Zone, and the majority of them are full. Boho One was never designed to be at 100 per cent occupancy; it was always designed to kind of have some level of churn and support businesses through an acceleration-type process.”

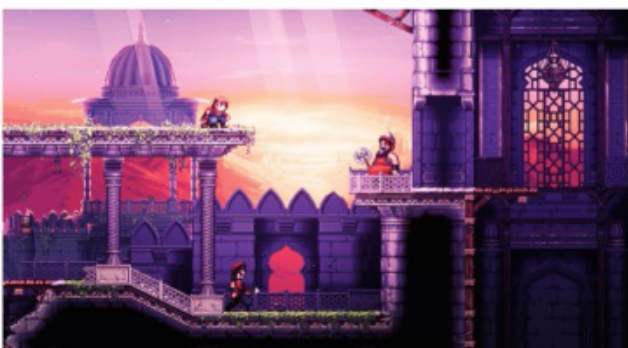
There are plans to expand to ten buildings. The expansion would include refitting the currently derelict old town hall, which was at the heart of the city when it was built in 1846, at a time when the population rose from 150 to 5,000 over ten years as people flocked to the town’s booming coal and iron industries. Repurposing it as part of the digital hub would be symbolic of Middlesbrough’s shift away from the heavy industries of old.

Brexit, however, is casting a pall of uncertainty over the venture. The EU’s European Regional Development Fund has provided a large portion of the capital for DigitalCity: between 2007 and 2013, for example, it contributed around £3.9 million, which helped to pay for construction of the Boho Five building, among other things. If that funding is cut off, it could have a big impact on DigitalCity’s plans.

That would, needless to say, be a tremendous shame: Crabb acknowledges how central DigitalCity has been to Coatsink’s existence, and his is far from the only story of its type. While much has been made about the potential impact of Brexit on the UK game industry, discussion has understandably been focused on large, established companies. Yet it is about much more than that – about not only protecting the developers and publishers that are already around, but through initiatives such as this, ensuring new ones can also flourish. ■



Boho One is the flagship building at the heart of the Boho Zone, and was constructed to meet the needs of digital media businesses



Despite its Arabian Nights styling, *The Siege And The Sandfox* is being developed in Middlesbrough's Boho Zone by Cardboard Sword. A 2D Metroidvania with an emphasis on stealth, the release date has yet to be confirmed but it already looks promising



TRAIN IN PAIN

The high-tech hub has an issue with less advanced transport



It may be turning into a tech hub, but in public transport terms Middlesbrough is in the dark ages. "Most of our staff were in Newcastle or the area, and loads of people had an hour's commute on public transport each way," Paul Beardsmore says. "There's no fast train, which is crazy. You have to take this stupid old bus-style train to Newcastle, and it's just hilarious. It travels at a max speed of like 30mph." The Northern Powerhouse Rail plans would see the East Coast Main Line upgraded to a high-speed network, but residents of Middlesbrough would still need to travel to Darlington on slower trains to access the fast trains to Newcastle.

Universal remote

Fellow Traveller's LudoNarraCon shows the benefits of a digital future for game conferences

More and more videogame conventions have popped up over the last decade, filling the calendar to the point where we now often see the same demos several times a year. Lately, some publishers and platform holders have begun to forgo conferences such as E3, wondering if they're really worth the bother. Indeed, while there's a thrill to the pomp and circumstance of a trade show, there are any number of downsides: certain games don't demo well on a busy show floor, many conventions are prohibitively expensive for developers and revellers alike, and some are inaccessible for people with certain medical conditions.

LudoNarraCon, held over an extended weekend in mid-May this year, was Australian indie publisher Fellow Traveller's alternative celebration of narrative-focused games. It hosted demos and panels with some of the industry's most prolific game designers on Steam via the storefront's new native livestreaming technology. At PAX Australia in 2018, managing director **Chris Wright** and marketing manager **Marla Fitzsimmons** met with Valve to check it out. "We thought, 'We like conventions, but are they cost-efficient, time-efficient?'" Wright tells us. "How do we do something cool with Steam? And what hit was that we could kind of fix both problems in one go. With Steam, maybe we can do it cheaper – and better. We could reach a global audience." The two sat down and began to list everything they'd usually get out of a convention: media coverage, people playing demos, mailing-list sign-ups and so on. "We started putting numbers against them,

and thinking, 'If we do this digitally, can we beat these numbers?' And we were like, 'Yes, these numbers are really low!'"

The plan was to feature not just games under their own label, but other small teams looking for support. "It was a whole host of work that went into pulling it together and looking at the content," Fitzsimmons says (indeed, moderating the livestreamed panels and ensuring technical issues were fixed quickly was a full-time job). "But when we actually looked at how we could set it up on Steam, it was really easy. Each exhibitor's game page became their booth space, and Steam helped us pull that together with a really great event page, where we could have our main panel streams at the top and then feature all of the games."

Anyone with a computer, phone or tablet and half-decent Internet connection could tune in – and tune in they did. Over the course of four days, over 870,000 users checked out the LudoNarraCon stream, and the event banners on Steam's front page garnered around ten to 12 million

impressions. Concurrent viewer numbers ranged between 1,500 and 5,000 viewers depending on the panel. The titles featured saw staggering numbers of people checking out their store pages and wishlisting the games (this is key, as on launch day, an email is sent to remind players to pick up the game). They had hoped for 2,000 wishlists on each game, but all received at least 4,000.

And all this without the hassle – and the inevitable flu – that comes with a regular convention. "The initial intention was to try and minimise the load on exhibitors and panellists," Wright says. "Exhibitors only

DOLLARS AND SENSE
Shrinking the distance between seeing a game at a convention and adding it to a Steam wishlist has benefits for everyone: game sales, Steam's traffic and players' convenience. But the benefits of a digital conference go beyond just sales figures. "Historically, Steam has only been able to connect people through their products," Short says. "I think with this kind of event, Steam and other platforms could start connecting people through actual interests."

had two or three hours to do, and then they could loop [their demo], and panellists just had to rock up to their panel and that was it – no travel, no messing around." For participants such as Kitfox Games director **Tanya X Short**, it was refreshing. "At PAX, if I'm moderating a panel, I prepare a slideshow that's everyone's pictures, their games and their questions," she says. "It's 15 slides and is still not a big deal, it's like an hour's work. But Fellow Traveller handled that for us." And the chat system of interaction between speakers and viewers worked well for devs, too. "I kept an eye on the chat and found questions throughout, which is something you can't really do during a physical panel. You can pick and choose without having to shut someone down publicly. It's better for those people too, because they feel like they get to say the thing they want to say – as long as it's not sexist or racist, or whatever."

The convention wasn't without its downsides: there are things that purely digital conferences just can't offer. "They had a lot of fires on their side where they were like, 'Install this technology and program' – and then two days later, 'No, don't use that! There's a bug that's unsolvable,'" Short says. Meanwhile, there was no reading the crowd. "You can't get that dynamic of asking people, 'Raise your hand if you've played this game' so then you know what to address and what not to. It might have been nice to get a better sense of who our audience was."

The tools to do so are built into Steam's infrastructure – should other publishers follow Fellow Traveller's lead, we may well see them put to good use. LudoNarraCon's is an approach that could help to spotlight games in an increasingly saturated and often inaccessible industry, and might even inspire the bigger players to follow suit. ■

Over the course of four days, over 870,000 users checked out the LudoNarraCon stream on Steam



Illustrator Will Kirkby's original art for the conference celebrates the power of narrative games, and how their creators build worlds from their homes

FLOAT ON

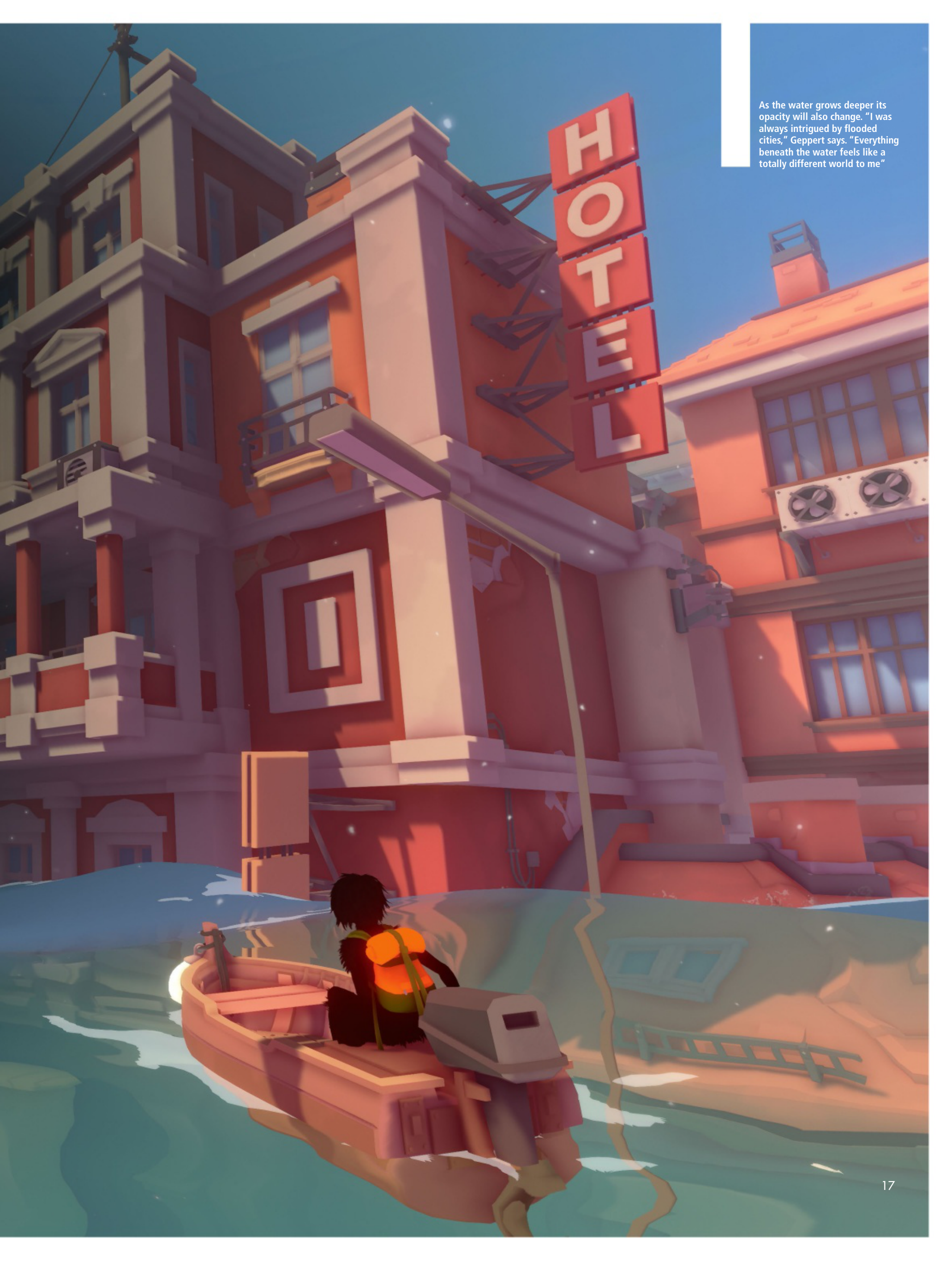
Floods of emotion take on literal – and horrifying – form in Jo-Mei's haunting seabound adventure

A tale of someone's inner demons becoming real under extreme stress might, to anyone who's been around **Edge** during deadline week, appear a bit on the nose. But in *Sea Of Solitude* it's loneliness, rather than workload, that brought out a monster.

Jo-Mei CEO **Cornelia Geppert** was inspired by Akira, *Dark Souls*, her upbringing on the Baltic coast and her current home of Berlin in crafting the aesthetic of what she says is "the most artistic and personal project I've ever created."

The monster, Kay, is a manifestation of Geppert's own emotions while she was writing the game's story: "Anger, despair, loneliness, worthlessness. I imagined myself just angrily scratching with a black pencil onto blank paper."

The titular sea rises and falls to reflect Kay's mental state, transforming the flooded city and opening up new areas and challenges. *Sea Of Solitude* releases through the EA Originals label on PC, PS4 and Xbox One in July. ■



As the water grows deeper its opacity will also change. "I was always intrigued by flooded cities," Geppert says. "Everything beneath the water feels like a totally different world to me"

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"For many years, Microsoft has been a key business partner for us, though the two companies have **also been competing** in some areas."

Sony CEO **Kenichiro Yoshida** puts a kindly gloss on the current generation's non-war when announcing a cloud streaming deal with Microsoft



"When game studios die, we shouldn't pull the games. Residual payments need to exist in games. **We're erasing art!**"

Former COD developer **Robert Bowling** laments the demise of not only Telltale Games, but of Telltale's games, too



"Through your experience playing the game, I hope you'll come to understand the true importance of **forging connections with others.**"

Ah, **Hideo Kojima**, so *that's* why you've spent the last two years posting selfies with every game-studio CEO on the planet

"We looked at what Marvel has done in taking the world of comic books and making it into **the biggest thing** in the film world. We're taking inspiration from that"

A Sony Connected Universe, SIE boss **Shawn Layden**? We assume you never played *PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale*



ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene

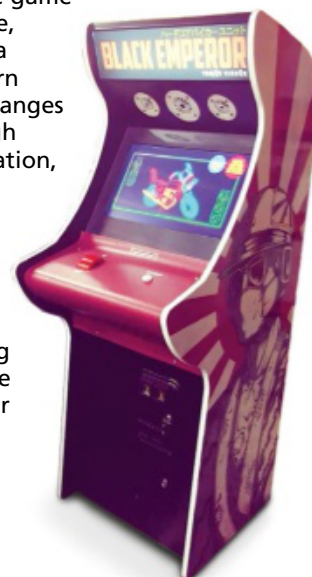


Game Black Emperor
Manufacturer Bumblebear Games

Bumblebear Games' *Killer Queen* has been an important game for the arcade scene, as we've covered in these pages before. Indie games in bespoke cabinets don't exactly come along every day, but the game's success, particularly as a tournament pursuit, has shown game makers, players and arcade operators of the merits of looking beyond the big names. Six years on from *Killer Queen's* debut – and with a revised version, subtitled *Black*, due on PC and console this summer – Bumblebear is returning to the arcade with *Black Emperor*.

Unlike *Killer Queen*, this is a singleplayer game, and is stripped back to the barest essentials, with only two control inputs. A button manages your motorcycle's acceleration, while a spinning wheel – like a trackball that only rotates vertically – is used for steering. The aim is equally simple: keep your bike on the track for as great a distance as you can. It's an endless runner of sorts, the screen's rapid auto-scroll meaning that even a second or two off the track spells game over. You'll need to watch out, too, for roadside barriers which, if clipped, will end your run instantly.

It's a high-score game in the purest sense, then – though in a thoroughly modern twist, the track changes each week through procedural generation, freshening up the challenge and reinvigorating the competition. At \$6,000 a pop, it's a hefty investment; daring to be different, we suppose, has never come too cheap. Godspeed, Bumblebear.



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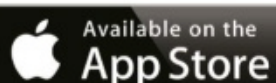
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My Favourite Game

Bruce Fielder

The dance-pop producer known as Sigala on rally training in VR, shared-world concerts and games as social spaces

Bruce Fielder is a producer and DJ from Norwich who shot to fame as Sigala with his Jackson 5-sampling debut single Easy Love. Ever since he's been producing radio-friendly pop tracks, working with artists such as Ella Eyre and Paloma Faith to deliver his first album *Brighter Days* in 2018. Here, he discusses queueing for Amigas, *Fortnite*'s cultural impact and the emergence of gaming's social side.

What's your earliest memory of playing or watching videogames?

My mum used to have an Amiga that she would use for work, typing letters, things like that. I had a game called *Datastorm*, which was a side-scrolling space shoot 'em up, and I would stay up all night trying to beat my older brother's score – and I finally beat it! It was really funny because me and my brothers would fight over who uses the computer, so my mum ended up writing out a rota system and we'd be sat there ten minutes before behind each other just waiting to play.

You've worked with lots of big-name artists, from Nile Rodgers to Craig David. Have any of them surprised you with a gaming habit?

After working with John Newman on my single Give Me Your Love, I found out that he was into gaming, and now we play *Dirt Rally* a lot. We both ended up buying full-motion chairs, a steering wheel and a VR headset for our PS4s, and we send each other our best times and try to outdo each other. Two or three times a year we actually go and do rallying in Wales. We use the PlayStation to practise in the meantime.

PRO-AM PRODIGY
Fielder's latest single as Sigala, *Wish You Well*, released in May with Gecko songstress Becky Hill on vocals. As it hits the charts, he's hard at work on his next album, creating new music before touring the UK with Craig David this summer. When we speak, he's preparing to take part in the *Fortnite* Celebrity Pro-Am in California in early June, though he doesn't know who his streaming partner is going to be. On whether he's going to perform on the main stage, Fielder is measured. "I'm super-competitive but I'll probably get eliminated in a matter of seconds. It's all for charity at the end of the day."



Have any game soundtracks left a particular mark on you?

When I left school and I decided I wanted to do something with music, I had played *Timesplitters 2* a lot in my childhood, and I actually downloaded the soundtrack and listened to it over bands when I was out and about. The composer Graeme Norgate was someone I was really inspired by. I still have all these instrumental tracks I made on my computer that were inspired by games.

Would you ever consider working on a game soundtrack?

Yeah. You know, as games have developed, the way music is made in games is more intelligent. I sat in on a mixing session for – I think it was a *Metal Gear Solid* game – and the way the music works is there's like ten layers at a time that are always playing and depending on what's happening in the game, you might just have the first layer which is some sort of ominous pad, and then you see an enemy and suddenly all of these other tracks are unmuted and it builds. It's really interesting to me.

What type of game do you gravitate towards, given your career?

My job involves a lot of going into clubs and venues and being in that environment, so when I'm home I don't really want to go out as much, but I still want to be able to socialise. So I play *Battlefield 1* with my best mates from school, and we'll have a catch-up. I love that games have become

this social thing now, like with *Fortnite* you can do squad fills, and if they have a microphone you can have a conversation. We've met some really interesting people doing that, people we still play online with. I think people can see gaming as a negative thing because it stops people being social and keeps them inside, but I actually feel like it's a really sociable tool.

Fortnite is made unique by its shared-world narrative and events, like Marshmello's in-game DJ set. What do you think the future of that looks like?

With the Marshmello concert, it was probably a lot of young kids' first ever gigs that they can say that they've been a part of: although they weren't physically there, they've got the experience of a live concert. I've met a few of the key people at Epic and I'm talking to them about being involved and potentially doing something with them, whether that's designing a part of the map or being involved in a concert myself.

What's your favourite game of all time?

I'm gonna have to say *Timesplitters 2*. It didn't take itself too seriously and they're the kind of games I really gravitate to. I remember my friend and I were trying to complete it in co-op on the expert setting, and we used to get stuck on this level called Neo-Tokyo, and I can remember the music and the way the level starts, it had this little public announcement Tannoy. It slightly haunts me, that level, or maybe it's a nice memory – probably a bit of both. ■



Fielder's summer tour began in early June, and he'll be a frequent sight on the festival circuit over the coming months. For info, see sigalamusic.com

COMIC

Life Is Strange Vol 1: Dust
bit.ly/LIScomic

If, like us, you're having trouble warming to *Life Is Strange 2*'s young protagonists, *Life Is Strange Vol 1: Dust* serves as something of a balm. Starring the original game's Max and Chloe, it's a brand-new story that follows on from the events of that game, in a timeline in which – brace for spoilers – Max chose to save Chloe over her hometown of Arcadia Bay. The “previously” catch-up sequence is a neat way of recapping the story so far, and new characters are all likeable and fresh, feeling truer to the teenagers of today. Unfortunately, dialogue with unironic uses of “Oh em gee” misses that mark, although we concede that “hella” is now a non-negotiable *Life Is Strange* staple. As is an atmospheric indie soundtrack, of course, and the manner in which the authors have represented that in this comic is delightful.



VIDEO

Playing Hard: The Movie

bit.ly/playingharddoc

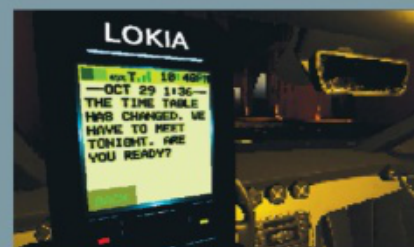
Raising Kratos, a documentary about *God Of War*, has been making the rounds on the Internet lately. It's a sweet but surface-level look at a game that was never destined to be an underdog. It has, however, reminded us of how excellent *Playing Hard: The Movie* is. Available on Netflix, it covers the giddy highs, and more importantly the crushing lows, of the creation of Ubisoft's historical-warrior brawler *For Honor*, for three members of the team in particular. It's shockingly candid – Ubisoft had zero directorial input into the film, meaning that Jean-Simon Chartier's doc goes to some painfully real places.

WEB GAME

The Interlude

bit.ly/interludegame

There are plenty of games devoted to the thrill of the heist – but what of the moment just before everything kicks off? ‘Anti-thriller’ *The Interlude* looks to explore the emotions that swirl around the minutes leading up to the big event. It does so admirably: a ten-minute wait has never felt so long. Sat in a car littered with fast-food wrappers, with only our Lokia-brand phone for company, we wait for our acquaintance to show up. Tactile elements (interactive objects such as door handles, radio switches and a fully-functioning game of *Snake*) encourage fidgeting and heighten tension as we watch out for the right car, ready to flash our headlights. We even give ourselves a fright when we accidentally turn on the windscreen wipers. Half-tedium, half-agony, this is clever atmosphere-building.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

PERIPHERAL

RasPi Smart Arcade Stick

bit.ly/RasPiStick

If the Capcom Home Arcade – a gigantic two-player arcade stick in the shape of the publisher's logo that has 16 coin-op classics preinstalled and plugs straight into the TV – put you off with its form factor or value proposition, this Kickstarter-funded alternative may be just the ticket. Its headline attraction is an onboard Raspberry Pi 3B+, which will run the operating system of your choice from a MicroSD card; with a Kodi install it can even serve as a portable media-centre PC. Pop it in Legacy mode, meanwhile, and it'll function as a traditional arcade stick on PC, PS3 and PS4. Almost fully funded at the time of writing, it's available in two flavours; naturally for us only the Pro variant, with its best-in-class Sanwa stick and buttons, will do.



continue

Gotta go slow

Sonic movie delayed to next year to fix those horrendous teeth

Touchy, feely

Sony files a patent for a haptic VR glove

Fantasy league

Dreams creators continue to produce staggering things

Stranding order

Kojima's absolutely off his bracket, isn't he? We can't wait

quit

Seeya

There goes Ouya, the little microconsole that, erm, couldn't

Choral brief

Even BioWare looks like it's given up on *Anthem*

Stories untold

Defunct studio Telltale's games begin to vanish from digital stores

La La Land

Why must magazine deadlines derail our pre-E3 hype train?



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DISPATCHES

AUGUST



Issue 333

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



PlayStation Plus

Wear the hat

Did you know that *The Division 2* was made by Ubisoft? If you didn't, you knew it after the first time you loaded the game. Yet, for some reason, Ubisoft reminds me, each and every time I start *The Division 2*, that it made it. Either Ubi thinks I have terminal amnesia or it is incredibly insecure. It also tells me what game engine it used. Each and every time. As if I, a regular punter, care! I've already bought the game, so it's not going to influence me in any way. So, while imparting this information makes no difference to my game whatsoever, doing so repeatedly is a complete waste of my time.

Also, why, upon loading a game, must I press X to start? I'd have thought that taking the disc out of the box, slotting it in the machine and pressing X to load the game were sufficient demonstration of my intention to play the thing.

Pretty much every game on the market is guilty of these sins, but I highlight *The Division 2* because of how much of my time it wastes. It takes a full minute before I'm even presented with the option to press X, 15 seconds of which is the Ubi and Snowdrop logos (another 15 is a superfluous epilepsy warning). The game then loads into the character selection screen (which takes another 25 seconds) and then into the game proper (which takes another few minutes). As I understand it, gamers are encouraged to spend no more than 45 minutes playing without a break. It takes *The Division 2* five per cent of that time to load up. Thinking this through, if the game takes someone 50 hours to complete, they will spend 2.7 hours waiting for it to load, over 30 minutes of which will be watching the epilepsy warning, and the developer and engine logos.

Perhaps we have videogame consoles' roots in the arcade to blame for all this, but I can't see the point of it.

"I'm usually in a state of anxiety because I'm not sure which items I should hold onto or not"

So, game makers, can we all agree that, if you really, really must tell me that you've made the game, say using the Havok physics engine, you only need to tell me once and that I really don't need to press X to start a game I've already started? Thanks.

Simon Brindle

At least a couple of those are platform-holder certification requirements, if we're to be fair, but we agree it can be a bit much. As for the epilepsy warnings, they're really quite useful if you have, you know, epilepsy.

Junk science

If there's one thing that keeps me from enjoying a new adventure game, it's inventory management. The first couple of hours I'm usually in a state of anxiety because I'm not sure which items I should hold on to or not.

A particularly nasty example is in *Zelda: Breath Of The Wild*, which told me to experiment with cooking. An hour later, the old man required me to make a specific meal for him, but I had already used up all the local bass on random recipes. I ended up not being able to get his nifty cold-resistant armour. A little bit later, I found out I needed to use a huge hammer to beat a stone boss. If only I hadn't wasted it on easier enemies...

I've had similar experiences in *Witcher III*, *Subnautica*, and *Skyrim*. However, I did not feel the same amount of anxiousness in *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, because its menus show how rare and expensive your loot is, and tell you precisely what it does.

This brings me to a concept I wish all adventure games had: a vendor who sells every item in the game, pricing them according to their rarity. This way I could look up the value and replaceability of things. This would mean only putting mental energy into highly priced items. Also: were I to make a mistake, like destroying a rare commodity,



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or simply not being able to find one, I could instead farm gold to still acquire it.

I understand that a sense of mystique is important in adventure games. It's exciting to find out about the hidden powers of items in games (like *Dark Souls* and *Planescape: Torment*). But please don't make me spend too much time wondering what everything is, and then punish me for experimenting.

Robert August de Meijer

Hallelujah. No doubt many RPG designers would tell you that decisions should have consequences, and if everything's in the shops then none of it is special. But we're right there with you, Robert.

The future of the future

For me, there are problems behind Stadia's vision of instant-streaming absolutely any of the world's games instantly – but they're not the ones that most people seem to be talking about. Our industry's asymptotic glide towards the laws of physics assures me that streaming's technological goals are very much 'when' not 'if', which begs the question of what happens once we get there. Is the grass as green as it looks?

The closest precedent we have is, of course, TV and movies, with the likes of Netflix and Amazon Prime vying for our attention. And what do those give us? Some great TV, sure, but also a difference in how we consume it. I worry that won't translate easily to the game industry, at least without significantly impacting its creative output.

Let's think of the terminology change of the last few years: "binge-watching" wasn't a thing before – does "binge-playing" await, and will we be better for it if so? I'm not so sure. And I worry that its translation to gaming will lead to bite-size or episodic content which hasn't suited the medium thus far. How will a 50-hour JRPG fare in that marketplace? What happens if licensing terms means it rotates out of your service provider's library midway through, without even the ability to transfer saves?

Within those online repositories, there's also just so much to choose between. Am I the only one who feels instantly overwhelmed, before flicking around and giving up? With games, I find the mere physicality of a disc change, or even a download, provides a buffer before which this kicks in, giving my apathetic self encouragement to stick with whatever I was playing before. Without this I'm not sure I'll cope – choice paralysis will overwhelm me!

But there are positives. The quality of TV's output has definitely gone up in recent years (Oscars for Netflix, no less), and online services now feel more mainline than watching off-air. Will greater ubiquity lead to games being more widely discussed, and yet more socially acceptable? Will that lead to sleeper hits that pick up through word of mouth rather than over-advertising? I certainly hope so. The one thing that is certain is that there's change ahead. We should proceed cautiously.

Murray Rogers

Nuance? We'll have none of that around these parts sir, this is videogames we're talking about. Do enjoy your PS Plus subscription.

(Stay gold)

Reading about Panic's new console, I started off incredulous, then was sceptical, before finally ending up quite excited. In an age of growing homogenisation and stagnation across mainstream gaming, something so idiosyncratic and disruptive really deserves to find success, just to freshen things up a bit – like indie games have done on the software side of things. And incredibly, it looks like it has a chance to succeed as well. With its distinctive aesthetic, a carefully curated collection of titles from indie darlings, and punk ethos, along with lovely retro graphics and a wonderfully anachronous analogue crank controller, it seems perfectly designed to appeal to the hipster crowd, God love them, as a counter-cultural statement piece.

There's only one problem – Playdate, really? What sort of a name is that? It's not even cool in an ironic way. Worse than that, it's so...

prosaic. Kind of like PlayStation, funnily enough – which is the complete antithesis of this machine; the very reason for its existence. Something like this feels like it should have a name that's either nothing to do with games, or is just a completely made up word. Hang on, I've got it – Indigo. It's ironic, because that's not the colour of the machine at all. And it's a pun of what the machine is for – indie games on the go. I'll wait for my cheque in the post...

Tom Laverack

If you like the thing, does it matter what it's called? If you need us, we'll be on our Wii.

Stranded

Hideo Kojima's latest trailer proves that the creator of *Metal Gear Solid* is not willing to let us know what *Death Stranding* is really about. After previous promotional videos, a nine-minute-long trailer doesn't explain the basics about its mechanics, overall plot nor even what kind of game are we talking about here.

It had to be the official PlayStation website where most players found some answers. We talk about asynchronous online gameplay which will let us help each other by sending supplies, sharing safe houses and following each other's footsteps while exploring a landscape "utterly transformed". Is it clearer now?

Be that as it may, I am sure that Hideo Kojima's latest videogame won't play a classic role in its genre, whatever it is. The complexity of its plot, including concepts such as death, destiny, parallel realities, encapsulated babies, paranormal activity, the afterlife, togetherness and the most likely approach to the ever-present concept of the human nature is something nobody could possibly expect to understand in its totality even when the ending credits roll. For better or worse, if Kojima didn't exist, he should be invented.

Lidia Castillo Cortés

*We wonder what Konami must make of *Death Stranding*. It shows exactly why the industry needs its Kojimas, sure – but also why Konami got rid of him in the first place. Baffling. ■*



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

You are creeping through a grand hotel lobby, dark save for pools of yellow light, and the enemy is advancing in stealthy formation. At length you engage, punching one guy and shooting the other – but the bullets from your handgun ping harmlessly off his black armour. And the next few ping off his black helmet. Damn it, these guys are tanks. You manage to lever one guy's visor open and shoot him in the face, but it's clear you need more firepower.

So back you scurry to the weapons cache, located in a tastefully furnished safe room, which is literally a giant safe. There is classical music playing. You scan the walls for guns. Maybe a shotgun will do the trick. Your partner holds up a red cartridge and notes: "Armour-piercing." Excellent! You load up, and load out. Those armoured guys aren't going to kill themselves.

This is an immensely satisfying trope – meet suddenly hard-to-beat enemies, find new tool to defeat them with – and could be a downbeat, moody moment in a *Splinter Cell* or *Modern Warfare* game from any time in the past decade-and-a-half. But the particular scene I am describing is from *John Wick: Chapter 3 – Parabellum*, another Keanu Reeves-led masterpiece. And it's a beautiful example of what clever film-makers can borrow from videogames, as opposed to what grumpy critics actually think they do.

Each film in the *John Wick* franchise so far, indeed, has been denounced by some or other grumpy critic as being "like a videogame", which is what people say when they have no idea what videogames are like, and also don't really understand the genre of balletic ultraviolence they are being forced to look at on the big screen. They probably once saw a clip of some frenetic FPS on the news and are comparing that to the films kids watch these days: nothing but guns blazing for two hours and enemies obediently falling down as if in a shooting gallery.

Of course, this isn't what a *John Wick* film is like either: there's much more kung fu



Marketing a film primarily at
a videogame-playing
audience is something that
leads repeatedly to disaster

involved, for a start. But what it does do, with a subtle wink, is nod to certain videogame conventions – like the new enemies with armour and the massive gun cupboard – as a kind of metatextual joke that will delight those familiar with the referenced material, while those who aren't won't be missing anything important. Like jokes for the adults in children's movies, they're not aimed at the primary audience, but are Easter eggs for the cognoscenti. And, as we know, marketing a film primarily at a videogame-playing audience is something that leads repeatedly to disaster.

The contrast could hardly be greater, indeed, between the pretty intergeneric finesses of *John Wick 3* and the online outcry over the trailer for the new *Sonic The Hedgehog* movie. Not because it looked like a terrible film, though it did: the kind of live-action-meets-CGI romp that gives the word 'romp' a bad name. But for the fans, it was unacceptable because *Sonic* didn't look like *Sonic*: rather than being made of heartwarming 16bit pixels, he now had distractingly realistic fur, and a mouthful of teeth. Teeth! (Spiny-mammal fact: real hedgehogs do have teeth, finding them useful to chew their food with.)

So a mere film trailer about a cartoon blue hedgehog with teeth was, one critic declared grandly, a "slap in the face" to fans. If you think about it, it was definitely not a slap in the face: a slap in the face hurts, while someone making a film about a blue hedgehog – even if you really like some earlier version of that blue hedgehog – causes you no harm at all. Nonetheless, online hordes of angry men piled on, until the film's director himself, Jeff Fowler, was driven to announce they would change *Sonic's* look before release.

This was yet more evidence that the most fractious and entitled whiny 'snowflakes' in modern culture aren't Millennials or younger folk, as older conservatives routinely claim; they're actually Gen-Xers, grown up on videogames, comics and fantasy novels, who have been hypnotised into thinking that their fandom earns them some creative control, that they are in some sense co-owners of the corporate-entertainment franchise products they have spent their lives consuming. Myself, I just hope the *John Wick* films keep coming – and that their makers never, ever 'listen to the fans'. After all, the real problem with the *Sonic* film, as far as one can judge from the trailer, is not the teeth: it's that it is going to be nothing like a videogame.

Steven Poole's *Trigger Happy 2.0* is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net

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NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

This is a pig of a column to write – and a very difficult issue overall, in fact. While you’ll be reading this after E3, the game industry’s annual measuring contest, is over and done with, we’re going to press a few days before we board the plane to LA. Now, I believe **Edge** readers are sympathetic to this, and understand that a magazine that thunks through their letterboxes just a few days after an event must naturally have been made beforehand. But, nonetheless, we want to be as timely as possible. We need some E3 in here – not just on the cover, but throughout.

I could use this page to make a few safe predictions. I could consult the tea leaves and state that Phil Spencer will have undergone as many costume changes during the Xbox press conference as Lady Gaga did at the Met Gala, albeit by sacking off the haute couture thing in favour of a load of game-logo T-shirts he got off Redbubble. Bethesda will have booked, for its aftershow party, a punk band from an era that makes Todd Howard feel young enough for his leather jacket. I will always have been low-level hungry, no matter how much I’d eaten, and 6/10 hungover, regardless of what (or whether) I drank the night before. I would be late for at least six appointments, and just about apologetically British enough to get away with it.

Bit of a cop-out, though, isn’t it? And that’s the problem with E3, or at least the source of a lot of people’s problems with it: it is too predictable, playing out in substantially the same way every year, the same bombastic press conferences and show-floor demos for what are ultimately the same games, just with different names. And that while it stays the same it falls ever further behind the increasingly broad industry it is intended to showcase. I can understand that perspective. But on the ground, E3 has changed significantly, even over the handful of years I’ve been attending (this year’s is my seventh). This year looks no different.

When I first went, in the year 1872 – okay, 2013 – the industry was struggling to



While E3 stays the same it falls ever further behind the increasingly broad industry it is intended to showcase

come to terms with the end of the booth-babe era. Which is to say they were still there – stationed every ten yards at the Ubisoft booth, giving out drinks in vest tops and camo shorts at the Wargaming party – but were a little more covered up, and a little less in your face about it. The following year they were gone, and a chat with a developer friend was punctuated by a visit from the feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian. This is where you see change: not in the pompous bluster of a publisher press conference, but in the margins, the small little details that hint at bigger things to come.

That said, even the big names have changed their ways over the years. I haven’t seen a sales graph at a press conference yet. The days of passing off pre-rendered trailers or ‘target renders’ as gameplay footage are behind us. In 2013 you had to hunt for indie games; now they’re front and centre on the big stages, and are some of the first appointments we schedule on our calendars. Shigeru Miyamoto taking the stage at the Ubisoft presser in 2017 to announce *Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle* was, at the time, a moment for the ages, but it also hinted at something bigger. Fast forward to today and the walls between companies are coming down, through cross-platform play, through collaboration, and if those Xbox-on-Switch rumours are true, even between consoles.

Mercifully, the way we cover the show has changed as well – and not just thanks to the tweak in our production schedule that means I will never repeat the events of E3 2015, when I spent every evening working until 2am in my hotel room to hit print deadline. Six years ago I used a recorder for interviews, lugged my laptop around so I could get the audio file off over USB and email it back to the home team to transcribe (or do it myself between appointments). Now I record interviews on my phone and upload the audio to the cloud and an AI transcription service while I walk to my next appointment. And y’all thought print was for dinosaurs.

None of this is to pretend that all is sunshine and rainbows at E3. The past couple of years, as it has wrestled with how to accommodate the public, have clearly been a problem. More worrying is the exodus of big publishers and platform holders, fed up of spending millions on floor space to compete in a battle for attention that gets harder every year. But as I prepare to board the plane, I feel only optimism. I’ll be looking in the margins for signs of change. I’ll be sure to report back – once I’m over the jetlag, anyway.

*Nathan Brown is **Edge**’s editor, and would like to make it clear he actually quite likes Phil Spencer’s t-shirt schtick*

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ALEX HUTCHINSON

Hold To Reset

Building a new game, a new studio and a new life from the ground up

As we careen closer to finishing *Savage Planet*, we've moved beyond discussing the features we should include or the type of the challenges, and onto the more distressing question of whether after all that, it's fun or even understandable to the average person. It's a normal part of the process, but no less confronting for it, as we check our assumptions against actual player behaviour.

Finding a repeatable way through this part of the dev process has always eluded me. It's easy to speak at a high level about what you want to achieve, but translating that into concrete tasks is a different matter. I have always felt there must be a more scientific way to approach it than what I've experienced over the last 20 years, but a useful example has been hard to find.

While thinking about how we'd tackle it, I was reminded of a quote from artist and *Hellboy* creator Mike Mignola. "My editor has suggested I say something about my approach to designing covers," he writes in the foreword to *Hellboy: 25 Years Of Covers*, "but to a large extent that's like asking about my approach to writing or laying out a page — I just bang away at it till I get something I like." Similarly, after marvelling at the tightness of Blizzard's games, I once asked a table of its designers what their process looked like. I had visions of spreadsheets and graphs and formulae, as their games can be complex, heavy in numbers, and yet feel pretty great. Straight from Rob Pardo, who was deeply involved in the tuning of *StarCraft* and *World Of Warcraft*, came the answer. Nope. They just bang away until it feels good.

Ignoring the terrifying leap of faith that implies, we simply do not have the time to run through as many iterations as that would take and worse, feels good to *who*? The first audience is always the team, and hopefully that's a good initial test, but you also want to appeal to a much bigger and more diverse group of people. With that in mind, EA and Ubisoft and all the other major publishers have been investing vast resources over the



We've been trying to find the sweet spot between highly directed gameplay and a freeform experience

last 15 to 20 years in building playtest labs, partnering with external playtest groups, and studying usability and player response.

This has given big studios the ability to gather massive amounts of manpower and data, using both focus tests, where you sit a bunch of players down with a build of the game, watch them play and then quiz them about their reactions (you'd be surprised how many people will do one thing and claim they did something else) or 'Kleenex' tests, which are the same, but you test the participants once then throw them away (hence the name) to capture their initial responses.

At Typhoon we've relied so far on a stream of 'friends and family' players, from both other studios here in Montreal and the more interested of our friends. It's not a huge sample size, but it's an educated assessment more often than not and useful for us to validate fixes or confirm problems. The lack of data volume, though, is not as big a loss as it sounds, as even with a large sample size it is up to the team to sort through what is just a broken, buggy or unfinished feature versus a real issue in your game, which is as much feeling as science. The bigger challenge is prioritisation, especially with a small team. What is a 'must fix' versus a 'nice to have'?

Clarity is our first priority: nothing matters until the player understands what we're asking them to do. We've been trying to find the sweet spot between highly directed gameplay and a freeform experience, which means endless revisions of the mission diary and the in-game markers.

Simultaneously we're tuning the health of creatures, their damage output and the amount of resources they drop. Continuing our pitch to older players who still love the medium but have less time to play between careers and kids, we want everyone to finish the game, so we're making sure there's no grind in the mechanics and that we prioritise novelty and new moments or mechanics over repetition. (My producer calls this the 'waste of money' approach, which makes me happy.)

And then we'll hit celebration. I want the creatures to burst like bubble wrap filled with green goo and a trumpet to play a short solo whenever you get a particularly juicy one. When you return to your habitat after being promoted, you should be showered in confetti while a celebratory tune plays. It feels appropriate for a mid-price game that tells jokes and relies on charm to carve out space beside the bigger, more epic and expensive competition. And besides, if you bought the game, you deserve a little confetti.

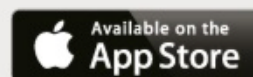
Alex Hutchinson is co-founder of Montreal-based Typhoon Studios. He can be found on Twitter at @BangBangClick

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THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

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Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Hype content

Setting sun

The tail end of a generation can be a rich time for game developers. With hardware installed bases about as high as they're ever going to get, the risk of new IP is dramatically reduced. If there's ever a time to take a punt on something brand new, this is it. Not that you'd know it, admittedly, from the sequels that front-load this month's Hype.

Yet there is another opportunity this late in a console cycle. It allows creators to put into practice all they have learned about their craft during the generation. Yes, we all crave innovation. But iteration can delight us, too.

And so to *Doom Eternal* (p34). The series reboot, released in 2016, did the hard work in redefining what the most revered FPS of them all should look and feel like on modern hardware. *Eternal* has the luxury of merely building upon those marvellous foundations, but it does so with style. Transporting the action from Mars to Earth, expanding the arsenal and adding a crucial mechanical twist to proceedings, it's textbook sequel-making – but when it's printed on such lavish stock, only a fool could complain. The same applies to its Bethesda stablemate, *Wolfenstein:*

Youngblood (p42), which shifts the focus from protagonist BJ Blazkowicz to his teenage daughters, transports the action from the US to France, and adds some series-first online co-op. Sign us up.

Yet it's possible to make a sequel while still taking a risk. *Psychonauts 2* (p38) arrives two generations after the original, and must tread a careful path – meeting the expectations of fans of the first game, while also keeping pace with the advancements in technology and game design that have occurred during its hiatus.

That's no concern for the developers of *Yooka-Laylee And The Forbidden Lair* (p52), who after paying homage to *Banjo-Kazooie* are now doing the same to *Donkey Kong Country*. The beauty of retro revivalism is that time stands still, and progress is a matter of taste.

MOST WANTED

Super Mario Maker 2 Switch

With review code not arriving in time for this issue's deadline, we're making other plans for the long flight to Los Angeles for E3. (They involve those little bottles of wine you get.) Still, no matter: perhaps we'll wait until launch, and factor your demonic creations into our verdict.

Star Wars: Jedi Fallen Order

PC, PS4, Xbox One

Apex Legends may have tailed off – at least at the time of writing; hope endures for Season Two – but the battle royale's success means Respawn's stock has rarely been higher. Hopes are duly lofty for our E3 hands-on. Report next month.

Fire Emblem: Three Houses Switch

A troubling lack of promotion for a game that's due within weeks should have been set right by the time you read this. Still, we suppose 'you can marry your best knight' is a difficult elevator pitch to market to the masses. Never mind – our minds have been long since made up.



The one thing you want playing *Eternal*: three undead goons with the same look of glowing-eyed shock as you strip their flesh away with a lightning gun

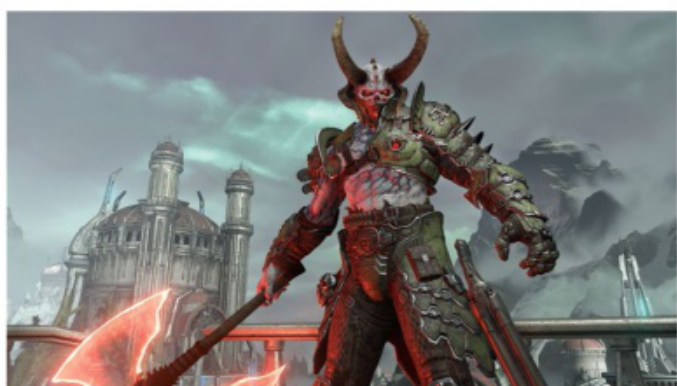


H | Y
P | E

DOOM ETERNAL

The greatest FPS of them all returns,
a little closer to home

Publisher	Id Software
Developer	Bethesda
Format	PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
Origin	US
Release	TBA



TOP *Eternal* promises a wider array of locations to shoot, hack, saw and punch through, including Id's glorious interpretation of heaven. ABOVE The Mars Core level sees the planet falling in on itself. It's the perfect opportunity for Id to show off its new thirdperson cutscenes

TOP If *Doom* could be criticised for having too heavy a reliance on similar mini- and main bosses, we're not sure the same could be levelled at *Eternal*. Id has gone to town on enemy art. ABOVE The new enemy types come with specific new ways to screw you over, including worm tendrils that spurt out from gooey crevices on the floors, walls and ceilings. RIGHT Not much to say about this one, really, is there? Yes, the chainsaw is back. Yes, it's even more gory than before. Yes, it's as gruesomely delicious as ever





DOOM ETERNAL

Put down the shotgun, pressure-wash away the dismembered corpses and *Doom* is really a puzzle game, albeit a perfectly tuned, tremendously tachycardic one. Despite its new, somewhat loftier setting, *Eternal* is no different. So while the resting heart-rate may have been punched up another two-dozen BPM or so, the dazzlingly pure framework that Id Software built for 2016's reboot is still firmly, intoxicatingly intact.

"If you meet people's expectations, you haven't done enough," says **Hugo Martin**, the game's co-director, as he explains the nuances of refining a series like this. The answer, he acknowledges, is not just to meet expectations, but to surpass them. Id's aim with *Eternal* is to provide players with the exact mechanics, weapons and combat scenarios they never knew they wanted. "It's a tall order," he says, "but we're all really excited to do it."

Beneath all the fancy particle effects and piled-up giblets, the core loop of *Eternal* is managing three vital survival resources (up from the previous game's two), each requiring you to commit to a different offensive attack to restock. Running low on life? Perform one of *Eternal*'s expanded suite of glory kills to bring forth health. Low on armour? Burn your enemies with the new shoulder-mounted flamethrower. Ammo reserves near-dry? Chop through flesh and bone with your chainsaw.

It's breathlessly simple, really – a diverse combat puzzle with three straightforward solutions – but feels so wonderfully dynamic in motion. It feels tougher than before, but perhaps we're out of practice. Regardless, a sparse weapon set ensures focus and, in time, something approaching mastery.

"We make a very conscious design decision to have a limited number of weapons," Martin explains when we ask how much precision goes into refining the arsenal of a new *Doom*. "They work very specifically, and we spend time, effort and iteration making every single animation, every single effect and every single impact. All of it has to work together."

Job done. Flicking through the arsenal on offer in our demo's radial wheel has the split-second immediacy of a gearbox on a race-ready motorcar. Even the plasma rifle, which

felt limp three years ago, has been augmented with the force-feedback you want from a gun that has the rapidity of a collapsing quasar.

Combined with those three essential skills for resource management – of ripping, burning and cutting through your enemies – *Eternal* has a far broader skillset than its predecessor. The FPS has progressed apace since the 2016 game, and Bethesda's own *Rage 2* recently sought to elevate Id's signature combat using a suite of ludicrously powerful abilities, but *Eternal* reasserts itself as the best and purest shooter that Bethesda has to offer.

A more indulgent aesthetic palette helps, too. *Eternal* depicts an Earth under the ravages of Hades, and it's a welcome departure from the relatively similar arenas and corridors of the previous game. Levels are much bigger, introducing traversal mechanics that see the slayer scrambling up walls and using a jetpack double jump to cross larger gaps. It makes

Levels are bigger, introducing traversal mechanics that see the slayer scrambling up walls

combat more vertical, more open to flanking manoeuvres, and gives you ample opportunity to use the new grappling hook to zip across a battlefield to deliver a brutal killing blow.

The more expansive approach to world-building seeps into the narrative direction, too: the action is even more bombastic and absurd. We didn't think it was quite possible, and then our hero punts an enormous shell from the barrel of a planet-cracking BFG, before climbing into the firing mechanism and launching himself into the middle of the collapsing planetary core of Mars. As you do.

So, all the pieces are here for a worthy follow-up to one of the best shooters of the last ten years. It feels essential, even before we learn more about the invasion multiplayer mechanic which, when we speak ten days before E3, remains a mystery. At first we think that's where the *Eternal* name comes in: a nod to a sequel that'll chase the games-as-service bandwagon but, thankfully, no. "It's the eternal battle between good and evil," Martin says. "Your fight is eternal, like the slayer's." ■



Slayer self improvement

Martin is quick to emphasise how everything the team has implemented while designing *Doom Eternal* is keenly focused on the player's constant betterment – delivering a more precise upward curve of energy throughout the game's progression. "The Mars demo was designed and paced in such a way that – number one, it's pretty hard [to demonstrate] because you're going into the middle of a campaign experience – but by the end of the demo, you probably felt like you were rather better than you were at the beginning," Martin tells us. "Hopefully, all of this means it's fun as shit." He's not wrong.





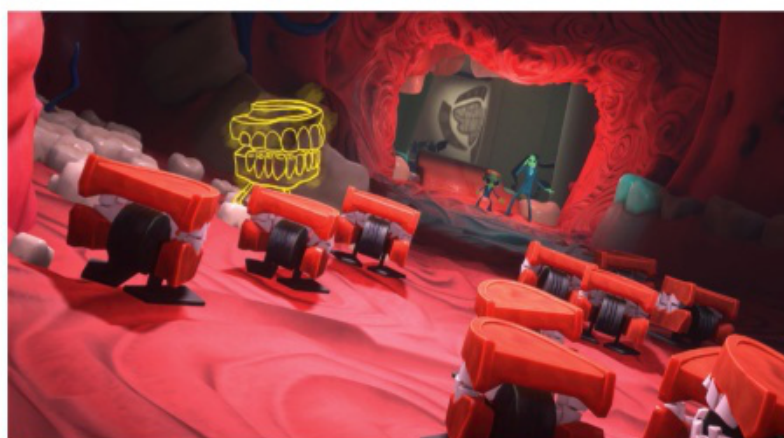
H | Y
P | E

PSYCHONAUTS 2

The brain trust is back

Developer	Double Fine Productions
Publisher	Starbreeze Studios
Format	PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin	US
Release	2019

Loboto does apologise to Lili for kidnapping her father, but it comes with a caveat: "I'm sorry *if* you were offended," he sneers. "That does it, I'm burning this guy," she understandably snaps



TOP If you're bad at dodging, stun enemies by lobbing something from range using telekinesis, then finish them off with a melee combo.
ABOVE Given Raz gets to use most of his Psi powers pretty much from the start, we can safely assume there will be new upgrades to come



TOP Figments are back, too. These brightly outlined collectibles vary depending on the level theme: expect syringes, dental mirrors and toothbrushes here.
ABOVE These posters raise a question that's quickly answered: it seems a third party has put them inside Loboto's head as an intimidation tactic.
LEFT Loboto's brain seems to be suffering from a really nasty case of hyperdontia – and no, we wouldn't recommend Googling that



PSYCHONAUTS 2

Reinsert the loose tooth; unzip the dental door; psi-blast the uvula – *Psychonauts 2* walkthroughs are going to sound *weird*. Which, of course, is as things should be. The first game was a witty but otherwise unremarkable 3D platformer elevated to something much greater by the feverish imagination of its worlds, each birthed from the turbulent subconscious of a troubled mind. Early signs suggest that, 14 years on, the sequel might just repeat the trick.

We open on the upper cortex of a brain, with the wrinkles steadily widening until the whole thing morphs into a top-down view of a nightmarishly large office, housing countless nondescript cubicles. Inside one we find protagonist Raz, who has traded his helmet and goggles for a crop of brown hair with a tidy side parting. Joylessly tapping away at his keyboard, he looks every bit the office drone. It's a sad sight: this is supposed to be his dream job, yet it looks anything but.

As it turns out, this is a construct, designed to let the Psychonauts explore the mind of Dr Caligosto Loboto, the unhinged dentist from the first game and antagonist of VR spinoff *Rhombus Of Ruin*. At the behest of colleagues Sasha, Milla and Lili, Raz is asked to find out who Loboto is working for. What follows is a tailing mission that's anything but orthodox. As Raz dons his familiar headgear, he almost immediately alerts Loboto by responding to his fretful friends: "I am acting casual." Told not to lose his quarry, he rounds a corner to find he already has; it seems Loboto has grown suspicious and taken countermeasures to protect his secret. Still, Raz's melee attacks make short work of a hastily-stacked pile of cardboard boxes, and the pursuit can continue.

Then things get *really* strange. Some clever perspective trickery captures that horrible dreamlike sensation of running towards something without getting any closer, as Raz hares down a seemingly never-ending corridor. Suddenly the room at the far end zooms into the distance, leaving him even further to go. When he eventually makes it, the room at the end is now a top-down view of the office – Loboto drops down

and walks along the floor, but to Raz it's now a wall, the cubicles becoming platforms for him to clamber up from a side-on perspective. When he reaches the top, the camera shifts back behind him, except now he's walking along the strip lights on the ceiling. By now, Loboto has grown much larger than the construct, having broken free of its confines; shaking the building violently, he sends Raz and another familiar face – the original game's militaristic Coach – falling into a grotesque world where teeth, gums and dental equipment have fused awkwardly with the office setting.

From then on, we get a pacy runthrough of Raz's psychic powers: as tutorial missions go, it rarely feels like one, with snappy cutscenes that can be measured in seconds rather than minutes. Using telekinesis, Raz lifts a giant tooth that has Coach pinned to the floor, before testing it out on the returning

The throw-stun-whack rhythm of combat is nothing new, but everything has extra zip

Censors, those bespectacled bureaucrats wielding their red rejection stamps, and a clutch of chattering dentures. The throw-stun-whack rhythm of combat – with the odd psi-blast to mix things up – is nothing new, but everything seems to have extra zip.

A series of propaganda-style posters subconsciously persuading Loboto not to spill the beans give Raz the opportunity to try out pyrokinesis; a set of highly flammable, goo-spitting monsters does the same. Then comes levitation, as you ride an updraught to float safely over to a dentist's sink before conjuring a glowing ball to roll down the plughole, which leads to an obstacle course of spinning teeth and collapsing enamel bridges. With an intriguing cliffhanger to round things off, it's just about the perfect appetite-whetter, suggesting Double Fine is more than capable of recapturing the original's inventive brilliance. As Milla purrs, "There's a little chaos on every mission, Raz". On this evidence, that's a major understatement. ■



Cerebral comedy

Psychonauts 2's story directly follows on from the ending of *Rhombus Of Ruin*. The incursion into Loboto's head is about discovering who asked him to kidnap Psychonauts chief (and Lili's dad) Truman Zanotto. Loboto's hardly the most sympathetic target, but even insane dentists have their demons; you'll notice the office signs have been amended with red pen, with 'break room' changed to 'break down', while 'storage' has had its first three letters scribbled out. There's plenty more visual humour, too. In one scene, you'll pass by a whiteboard bearing the legend 'Record Profit!!' at the top; beneath the pie charts and bullet points, the only other legible text reads: "Conclusion – LAYOFFS!" It's fair to say Tim Schafer's unlikely to get back on Bobby Kotick's Christmas card list any time soon.



H | Y
P | E

WOLFENSTEIN: YOUNGBLOOD

Wolfenstein heads to Reich-ridden Paris
amid the glamour of the '80s

Developer	MachineGames
Publisher	Bethesda
Format	PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
Origin	Sweden
Release	July 26

Youngblood's Paris might look quaint in specific areas – much like *The New Colossus's* Roswell – but the city isn't without its far-right inflections, including enormous control spires towering on the skyline





ABOVE The open levels offer greater freedom, but the more cramped layouts of interiors require tighter coordination between you and your co-op companion.

TOP RIGHT In our demo, Sophie and Jess both come up against their first Nazi officer – a botched kill that plays out in gratuitous, albeit amusing fashion.

MAIN The variants of heavily armoured Nazi now come in many more shapes and sizes, but take much more firepower to bring down. BELOW LEFT Deep blacks and bright, bloody reds, highlighted with a metallic sheen – it's *Wolfenstein*, all right. MachineGames certainly knows how to create a vivid world.

BELOW RIGHT At its most serene, *Youngblood* has the Parisian street vibes of Irrational's *BioShock Infinite*. Things don't stay quiet for too long, of course





WOLFENSTEIN: YOUNGBLOOD

Well, they had us at ‘developed in partnership with Arkane Studios’. Eighteen months after the release of *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*, Swedish studio MachineGames has hooked up with the Lyon-based creator of *Dishonored*, ostensibly to augment this vibrantly violent alternate-history FPS with a dash of Arkane’s open-ended level design. And – if you hadn’t noticed from the neon-soaked sights and Jean-Michel Jarre-esque sounds – to take the whole thing to the heart of France in the synthesised midst of the 1980s.

It isn’t, it transpires, the only big change. MachineGames is pitching *Youngblood* as an even bigger leap forward for the series than 2017’s *The New Colossus* was from 2014’s *The New Order*. That’s no small claim for a this co-op spin-off, which sees long-time series protagonist, William ‘BJ’ Blazkowicz, out for the count. In his inimitable place come his twin daughters, Soph and Jess, who head to the French capital to try track down their father. Two decades after he liberated the US from the Nazi war machine, he’s disappeared for reasons unknown. Without wishing to spoil anything, it may have something to do with his unending need for vengeance.

It’s a bloodlust that both BJ and his wife, Anya, have attempted to instil in their teenage girls. Our demo opens with Soph and Jess being taught key killing techniques by their elders – Jess gets a healthy dose of hunting in the wild with dad, armed with nought but a heavily upgraded sniper rifle and her improving senses, while Soph is given an intense melee training session by mum. When Soph eventually succumbs to tiredness, Anya gives her a real taste of combat – holding a makeshift knife to her throat, insisting that if their Nazi enemies can endure for just one second longer, it’ll mean certain death.

So far, so *Wolfenstein*. MachineGames’ talented writers briskly manoeuvre the tricky waters of a hard-hitting family drama that’s lined with the sharp wit of a black comedy. It’s both shocking and funny at whiplash pace. Not just because of its penchant for out-and-out gore, but also the naïve sensitivity of its central pair: while the two of them quickly get into the swing of killing, there’s a rawer

dynamic between them than the series has previously played with. That in itself is exciting narrative territory for such a capable team.

And then comes the rest. Across two distinctly different levels – the first inside the hulking gunmetal airship called the *Nachtfalter*, and another on the sun-bleached streets of Paris – we see MachineGames demonstrate *Youngblood*’s structural shake-ups. First come the traditionally confined, near-claustrophobic corridors of *Wolfenstein* as you know it, treating you like a rat in a run as you dart from room to room strategically managing your arsenal of weapons to decimate the Hugo Boss-clad cannon fodder. And then, with the spirit of Arkane in its sails, come the open-ended hub levels infused with the come-look-over-here freedom of *Dishonored 2*’s Karnaca. We see nothing here quite so beautifully, intricately complex as that game’s Clockwork Mansion mission, but it doesn’t

To be played with your finger on the trigger, rather than perched up in the rafters

need to be. *Youngblood* is still very much a MachineGames joint: this is a game to be played with your finger on the trigger, rather than perched up in the rafters.

It helps that combat has had a healthy injection of firepower. If there was any major mechanical criticism to level at both *The New Order* and *The New Colossus*, it was that their guns simply didn’t match up to the standard of other Bethesda-published shooters – namely, anything with Id on the box. Here, the gap in quality has been closed. Firing off shotgun slugs with wanton savagery now packs the devastating jolt of force-feedback it deserves, while your array of automatic weapons rattle with a punchy rat-a-tat.

We went in expecting glorified DLC, and found an inspired marriage between two of Bethesda’s best teams. MachineGames’ work has always had a certain confidence to it, but *Youngblood* reflects a developer aware of its shortfalls – if everything slots into place, this spin-off might just turn out to be the most accomplished *Wolfenstein* to date. ■



Feeling free

Arkane’s fingerprints are all over the game’s structure. The team has broken apart the relatively constrained attempts of MachineGames’ previous outings, so, while *The New Colossus* dabbled somewhat in larger arenas with perhaps two or three routes to solve any combat puzzle, *Youngblood* instead offers players the breathtaking art design of this twisted world with the finesse of a team used to creating labyrinthine levels. The campaign has multiple hubs, each of which you can tackle in different orders and return to at your leisure. It isn’t clear from our demo quite how heavily the game will rely on these more expansive stages compared to the traditional levels, but greater choice and deeper progression push *Youngblood* in a tantalising direction.



Your choices affect the kind of leader you become. Engage in spiritual matters to gain Believer points; following an intellectual path could make you a Scholar. You'll never become an Altruist if you sell anyone to slavers

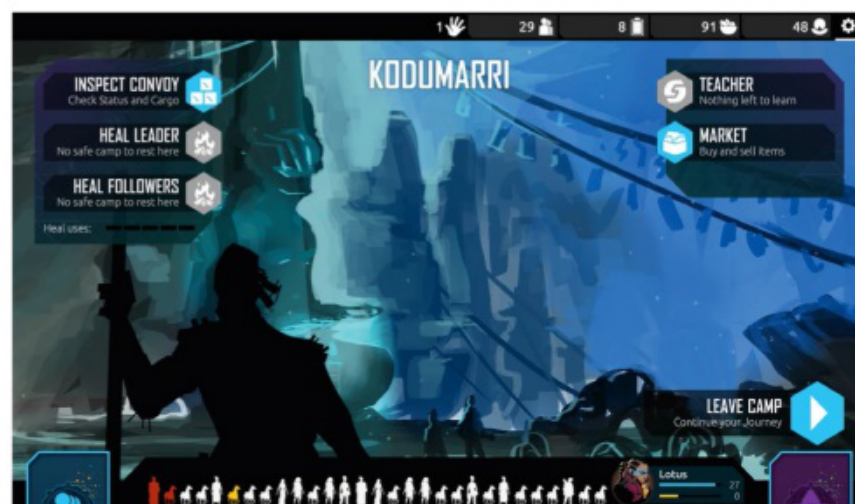
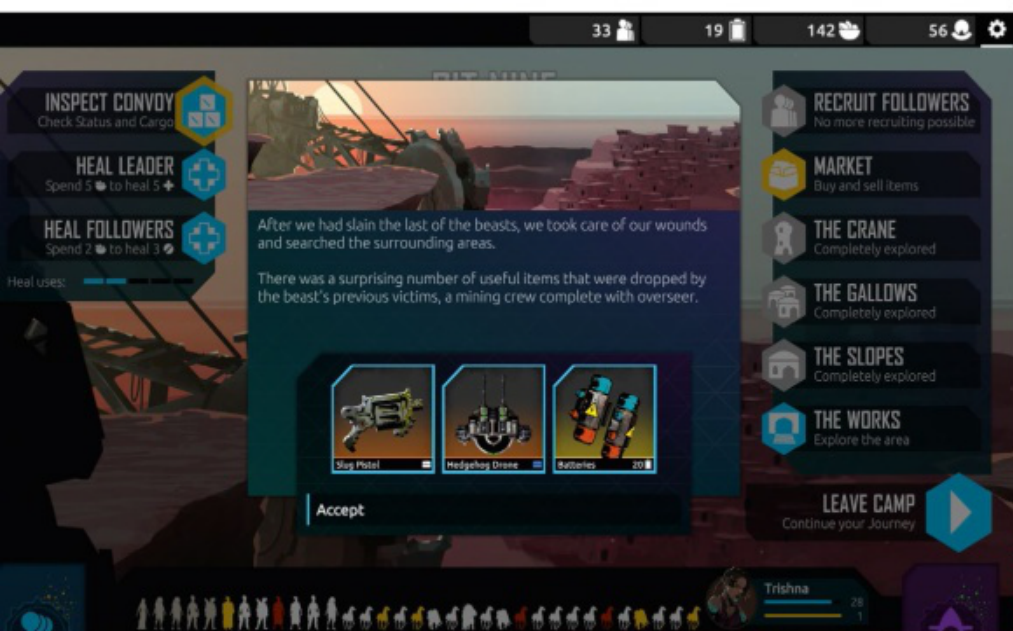


H | Y
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NOWHERE PROPHET

A post-apocalyptic deck-builder that
looks on the bright side

Developer	Sharkbomb Studios
Publisher	No More Robots
Format	PC, Switch
Origin	Germany
Release	Summer (PC), 2020 (Switch)



TOP Crossed swords denote well-defended areas, but potentially lucrative spoils. New routes that aren't immediately visible can open up once you travel further down a path; you're not forced to follow it to the end, but it'll cost you food and hope to backtrack.

ABOVE You can heal yourself and your followers at camp sites, though once you've done so you can't keep returning for a top-up.

ABOVE LEFT Buying new weapons and gear adds new cards to your leader deck.

LEFT Three spikes on a unit's icon means it can attack, though Nerurkar suggests he's still refining the UI to make that clearer. Followers can attack leaders directly, but if an opposing unit uses Taunt, you're forced to target them



NOWHERE PROPHET



Hope is in short supply in any post-apocalyptic scenario, but *Nowhere Prophet* is no ordinary post-apocalypse. **Martin Nerurkar**'s enterprising deck-builder adds a dash of optimism and a splash of colour to the genre. As its creator points out, it's less *The Road* and more *Mad Max: Fury Road*, which he (correctly) identifies as "one of the best movies of the past decade". But its distinctive look is rooted more in his own half-Indian heritage: the bright robes sported by the characters are inspired by the festival Holi. For once, browns and greys are scarce.

The game begins with the discovery of a dying machine, which speaks of a crypt somewhere out in the wilderness that will offer refuge and knowledge to those who reach it. Watching on, a gathering of dumbstruck locals decides you must be some kind of prophet, and joins you on your travels. "I was always interested in a narrative where you take care of a group," Nerurkar explains. "I didn't just want you to be this badass lone warrior going through the wasteland."

As your convoy advances, you choose between nodes on a simple map: trickier terrain tends to yield better rewards, but costs you more food and hope (your two most important resources, along with batteries, the main currency) and the risk is naturally higher. You trigger random events whose outcomes are determined by invisible dice rolls and your own abilities: will you fight a group of brutal slavers or give up one of your own in exchange for safe passage? Elsewhere, you explore silos and ransack warehouses, while trading supplies and luxury goods at markets, and potentially recruiting more followers. The feeling of responsibility, and the emotional weight that carries, is reminiscent of *The Banner Saga* — even if this world isn't quite so relentlessly bleak.

Those followers then become cards in the game's intricate tactical battles. Each side has a 3x3 grid on which they can place their units, with actions limited by an energy gauge that increases after each turn, creating a sense of escalating possibility and peril. Only the first unit in a row can attack, which lets you place healers and the like safely behind your front line — though any card you play is

immediately vulnerable, since it can't act until the following turn. Meanwhile, a second deck for leader actions gives you the chance to buff your troops or attack the enemy leader directly. Reduce their health to zero and it's all over; a fortuitous draw might just mean you finish a fight without having to risk any of your people.

There are other variables to consider, such as environmental cover, but one mechanic which has a significant impact on battle strategies is the way wounds are handled. As in *Fire Emblem*, having a name attached to a unit subtly discourages cavalier tactics, even if you never quite get as close to any individual followers. But Nerurkar's approach to injuries and death is less exacting than Intelligent Systems'. A unit can have its health reduced to zero, but that's not the end; play them in a subsequent battle without healing at a camp, however, and you can lose them forever. Yet

Random events' outcomes are determined by dice rolls and your own abilities

when wounded they become cheaper to play, potentially letting you risk powerful attackers to finish off an enemy quickly. "In an early iteration, people could take four wounds and there were no penalties," he says. "And it meant you didn't really care. Then I had a version where being wounded was worse: they'd only deal one damage at the same energy cost. So you'd just want to take them out because they were inefficient. Now, interactions with the wounded follower are a lot more valuable for the player."

As Nerurkar approaches the terminus of his own long journey, he seems satisfied at where he's ended up. There's still tweaking to be done, not least with the difficulty — with ten convoys to unlock, that's an awful lot of cards to balance — but otherwise the beta feedback he's focusing on most intently is bug fixes. "I've been developing it for a long time and testing it for a long time. It's been at a lot of conferences, I have a lot of good feedback already in the game. I think it's in a really nice place." We wouldn't disagree. ■



The long game

Nerurkar has been working on *Nowhere Prophet* on and off for more than five years. Development started early in 2014, at which point he planned to have what he calls "social combat" as an alternative method of conflict resolution before it became "too sprawling in scope". The current battle system also took time to come to fruition, he says: "It was more like *Slay The Spire*, as in cards were actions — they didn't stay on the board." At the end of 2016 he decided to take a six-month hiatus, returning to the game for a period of prototyping, when he had an epiphany: why not turn followers into cards? "I wanted your people to be a more physical presence. Putting them on the board also meant the tactical situations became more complex and could evolve more."



Developer/publisher
Size Five Games
Format PC
Origin UK
Release 2019



LAIR OF THE CLOCKWORK GOD

Platformer meets point-and-click as Ben and Dan return

Two years in development but a decade in the making, *Lair Of The Clockwork God* is a return to the genre with which Size Five Games first made its name – or, more accurately, its previous name, *Zombie Cow Studios*. Just don't call it a comeback. "I know it feels like we're going back to point-and-clicks," **Dan Marshall** tells us. "But in a lot of ways I never really left them."

That said, it's now been 11 years since Marshall and co-creator and writing partner Ben Ward brought us pay-what-you-want adventure *Ben There, Dan That*, while sequel *Time Gentlemen, Please* celebrates its tenth anniversary this month. Since then, Marshall has worked on the Channel-4-funded edutainment game *Privates*, the underrated one-on-one shooter *Gun Monkeys*, steampunk stealth Roguelike *The Swindle* and football parody *Behold The Kickmen*. "I think I need to go away and do different things, I need that creative space," he says. "If I'd made adventure games solidly for my entire indie career, I'd have gone potty by now."

Marshall and Ward have been discussing a third Ben and Dan game ever since the second launched. The two former classmates might now be on other sides of the country, but they still meet up every so often for a beer and a chat, usually with a pad and pen handy. "We've been talking about stupid jokes and silly puzzles until the whole thing has come together." The game itself isn't far off being done, but the script is; by the time you read this Marshall and Ward will have returned from a week-long retreat at a log cabin, where the bulk of the dialogue will have been written and the puzzles fine-tuned.

The game itself has taken longer to figure out – Marshall suggests the pair have gone back to the drawing board twice already. The



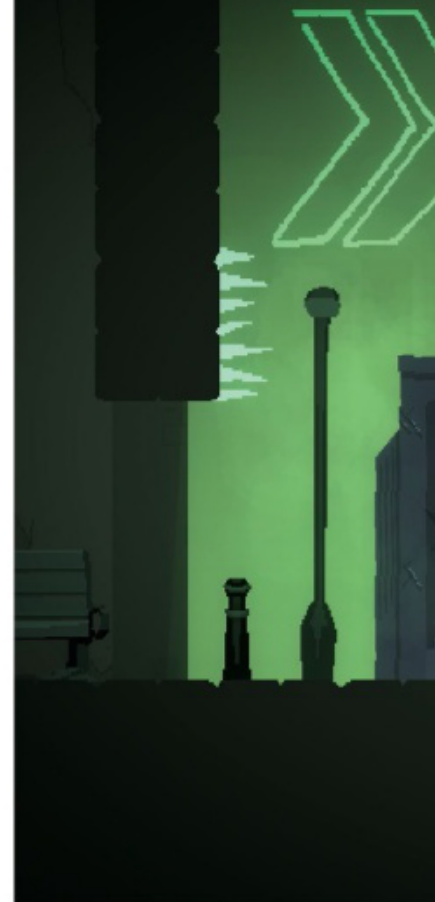
debut trailer bullishly declares it 'a reinvention of the point-and-click genre', but that seems a playful exaggeration; it is, Marshall says, more about identifying (and fixing) what's stopped him from enjoying adventure games lately – namely keeping "the amount of dawdling" to a minimum. "There's always a bit where you wrap up a big series of puzzles," he says. "And the next act gives you a big new area to explore. I feel like

"We've been talking about stupid jokes until the whole thing has come together"

if you had metrics on those games, that's where people stop playing. There's a bit in one of the *Monkey Island* games where you get to a new island and there's like eight shops with eight shopkeepers in and a jail. And I've got to talk to all these people and go around all these environments before I know what I'm supposed to be doing."

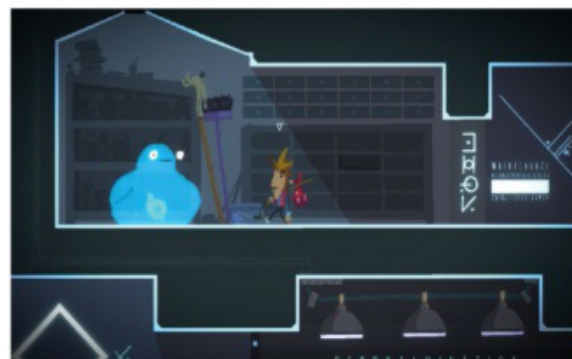
The solution has been to keep the action more tightly focused by adopting a structure

ABOVE Who, indeed? Or glances at captions for that matter. As for boxout headers, we can but hope





LEFT Marshall experimented with puzzles with multiple solutions, but it didn't quite work out. Still, he suggests there will be interplay between the two characters beyond their bickering. BELOW Ben and Dan will often be separated and you'll be able to flip between the two of them



ABOVE "Levity and stupidity is the order of the day for 95 per cent of the game," Marshall says, though there will be levels themed around weightier topics such as grief and fear. "It wouldn't be a pastiche of indie games if it didn't have a certain... gravity, I think is the word. It's got to have this dark heart for everything that surrounds it to really work"

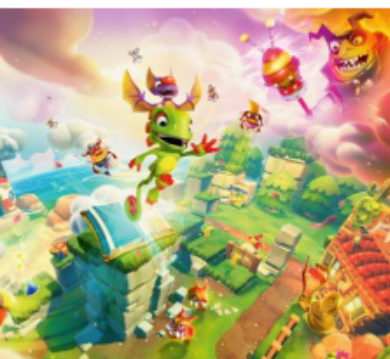
more akin to a platform game, with a central hub world from which you can access various self-contained stages. You'll be able to swap between the two characters: Marshall's alter-ego fancies himself a platforming hero, using power-ups (from double-jump trainers to a wall-grab) that Ben has combined in his inventory. "It means you don't have to worry whether you picked up that item three screens ago or backtrack to the 18 locations you've unlocked so far. You know that everything you need is directly in front of you, and that just keeps everything so much snappier."

It also means he and Ward can write gags about the indie-platformer boom. "We hit

upon the idea of turning it into a platformer a long time ago, when all of the jokes were going to be about *Sonic* and *Mario*. But then *Braid* happened, *Super Meat Boy* and all that," he says. "*Celeste*," he adds with extra emphasis, suggesting there's more where the trailer's nods to 'worthy quests' and 'talking about feelings' came from. But as with the previous two Ben and Dan games, he insists there won't be any punching down, and any jabs are self-deprecating anyway. "We're making fun of something that the game already is – and, of course, we've got all the same old point-and-click jokes." He laughs. "Now it's been ten years, I don't mind making them again." ■

Partners in time

Marshall describes the Ben and Dan from the games as a locked-in-time version of their real-world selves at 16, recalling how they would write comic books in class. "He'd do a panel and then I'd do a panel and we'd just try to write the other person into this horrendous corner," he says. They may be older now, but they're no wiser. "I hate that thing in media where characters change," Marshall says. "When they do a new one after ten years, and it's like, 'Wouldn't it be interesting if these characters all have babies to look after?' No. Watching this hilarious knockabout character struggling with parenthood? I don't want to see that. I want to see them exactly how I remember them."



YOOKA-LAYLEE AND THE IMPOSSIBLE LAIR

Playtonic continues its loving reprise of the Rare back catalogue

Credit where it's due – the team of mostly former Rare developers at Playtonic know exactly what they're doing. Released in 2017, the Kickstarter-funded *Yooka-Laylee* wasn't so much an homage to 1998's *Banjo-Kazooie* as a modern-day rebadging of it, a spiritual reboot not only of a classic game, but of a whole genre, or at least the part of it that Rare absolutely cornered in the N64 era. So it is here. The elevator pitch is straightforward: if Playtonic's colourful *Banjo* riff tickled your fancy, you will probably also be interested in its spin on *Donkey Kong Country*.

Squint a bit and, on first inspection, *Yooka-Laylee And The Impossible Lair* is mechanically inseparable from Rare's SNES platformer. There's a similar hefty momentum to the player character – oddly, given a chameleon is no ape, even with a bat riding on its shoulders – and the same barrelling forward roll. Level design is familiar, too. You collect Quills instead of bananas, sure, but the inspiration is, to put it mildly, worn on *The Impossible Lair's* sleeve.

An environmental change in the overworld alters the layout of stages in the same region

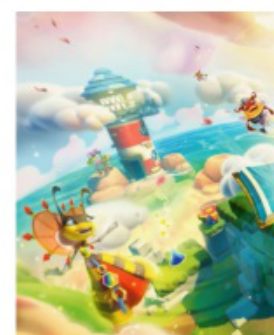
Differences do, however, yield themselves during the two early missions that comprise our demo. Get hit and Laylee takes off, flying around in panic for a few seconds. Fail to get to her in time – no easy task given her unpredictable flight path – and she'll be unavailable until you call her back using bells that, even early in the game, are far from generously placed. While she's absent, you'll be missing a few moves. Still, even solo, Yooka retains his Lizard Lash ability, an extension of his tongue that in the previous game was used to grapple across otherwise impassible gaps by latching on to fixed points. It isn't usable in either of the levels we play,

but it seems that's a recurring theme; certain areas can't be reached with our current moveset, suggesting a gentle gear-gating element that will see you return to completed levels later on to mine them for secrets.

The same applies to the overworld, which represents the biggest departure from the *Donkey Kong Country* template. Essentially an interactive world map, it's full of light puzzles – Yooka slurps up a bomb, scurries over some platforms while the fuse burns, and fires it at a rock blocking the way to a tunnel that leads to the next area – and what happens up above can affect the levels themselves, with an environmental change in the overworld altering the layout of a stage in the same region. A water puzzle later on floods part of the world map; within it, the foliage has grown into a jungle.

It's this element alone that stops the game being a work of outright nostalgia, at least from what we've seen of it so far. Yet even the overworld feels familiar, albeit to a far more recent game. Players of *Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle* will feel right at home with its light-touch puzzling and exploration. And if the mechanical link isn't obvious enough, the soundtrack – the work of Rare stalwarts David Wise and Grant Kirkhope, the latter of whom also scored *Kingdom Battle* – rams the association home.

This is what Playtonic does: reminds you of things you liked or loved a long time ago, and invites you to relive them. That there is little here one might reasonably consider innovative is no black mark against a studio that does not set out to make anything of the sort. Yet this game nonetheless represents a bold step forward for Playtonic: without the financial safety net it enjoyed through *Yooka-Laylee's* Kickstarter success, it's under a little more pressure to deliver. And, of course, it again raises the question of what the studio will do once it's worked its way through the Rare back catalogue. We'll take *Jet Force Gemini* next, thanks. ■

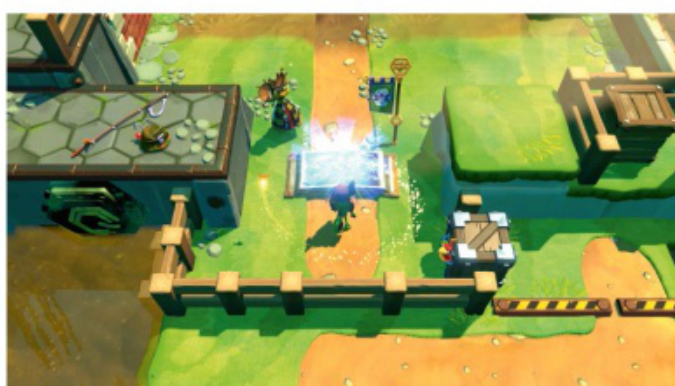


One pun in ten did

The first *Yooka-Laylee* game's story seemed mostly to exist so that the Playtonic team could rattle off all the dad-puns they could think of – nothing in this console generation has yielded anything so 1990s-lads'-mag as a snake called Trowzer. And while scriptwriter and former CVG editor Andy Robinson has since hopped back over the fence into journalism, the spirit clearly lives on (albeit not quite so muckily just yet). The wisecracks come thick and fast; not all of them land, but they didn't back in the day either, so consider that mission accomplished.



LEFT These jetpack-wearing critters are tougher than they look, their wayward flight paths making it tricky to line up a head-bounce. BELOW Checkpoint drones are generously spaced – unlike the bells that call a lost Laylee back to you



ABOVE The *Mario + Rabbids* vibe of the overworld is no coincidence. From what we've seen it's the more engaging part of the game. RIGHT Our demo build has a few framerate issues, which we're choosing to blame for a handful of mistimed jumps. That's our excuse, anyway, and we're sticking to it





ROUND-UP

CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE

Developer Infinity Ward Publisher Activision Format PC, PS4, Xbox One Origin US Release October 25



Joining *Tomb Raider* and *God Of War* in the “most likely to confuse parents at Christmas” club is Infinity Ward’s reboot of its esteemed 2007 FPS (itself remastered in 2016). This time, you play grizzled mainstay Captain Price and Urzikstan rebel leader Farah Karim, fighting all over the world on both sides of a harrowingly contemporary war. Photogrammetry and new spectral rendering technology hope to boost gritty realism. In the interest of preserving it, a co-op mode replaces *Zombies* – though, as ever, we expect the rampant teabaggery of the multiplayer to forcibly drag us back to reality. We appreciate the effort, at least.

DEATH STRANDING

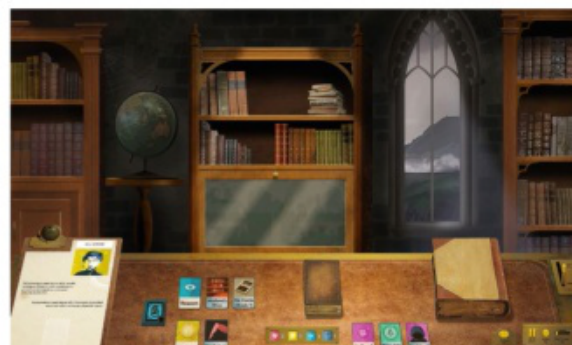
Developer Kojima Productions Publisher SIE Format PS4 Origin Japan Release November 8



Ready or not – and we are not entirely certain that we are – Kojima Productions’ debut is coming this year. Film director Nicolas Winding Refn as Heartman was one of the weirder surprises in the announcement trailer: we also find ourselves unreasonably thrilled by the appearance of a retractable ladder, used to climb acid rain-lashed crags. Forget taking Shuhei Yoshida to Nando’s – if Kojima ever comes to Bath, we’re organising a trip to Homebase.

BOOK OF HOURS

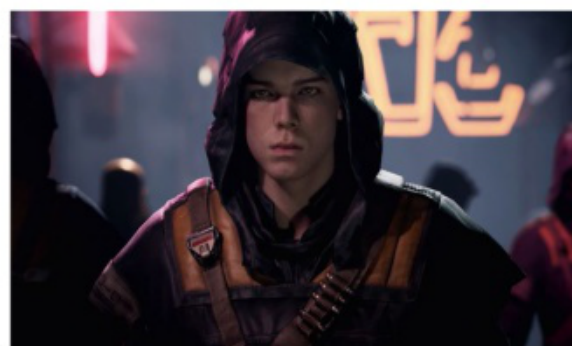
Developer/publisher Weather Factory
Format PC Origin UK Release 2021



This *Cultist Simulator* spinoff, conceived on Twitter by Alexis Kennedy, is officially happening. It’ll function similarly to the original game, although this time you’re in charge of running an eldritch library, dealing with cursed books, defending the building from psychic attack and pleasing the odd clientele.

STAR WARS JEDI: FALLEN ORDER

Developer Respawn Entertainment Publisher Electronic Arts
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One Origin US Release 2019



The last Star Wars game standing is coming on in leaps and bounds in every sense. *Jedi: Fallen Order*’s thirdperson combat is mainly based around movement, it seems, with wall-running and the ability to force-pull impromptu platforms towards you creating more dynamic and strategic lightsaber duels.

MONSTER HUNTER: WORLD – ICEBORNE

Developer/publisher Capcom Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin Japan Release September 6 (PS4, Xbox One), TBA (PC)



With a map rivaling the size of the satisfyingly chunky base game’s, this is – fittingly – an expansion pack of gargantuan proportions. Expanded weapon movesets have us champing at the bit to return to the hunt, as does the appeal of making a nice new pair of trews out of ice dragon Velkhana.



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VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY



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CROWD CONTROL

Ubisoft's boldest blockbuster in years takes the N out of NPC

BY CHRIS SCHILLING

No city is anything without its people. Yet they're often the last thing we think about when it comes to urban open-world games. We marvel at the number of square miles of real estate we've been given to explore; we gaze longingly at the toys and tools we'll eventually accumulate to help make the place our own; we stare at map screens pocked with icons, spoilt for choice about what to do and where to go next. Meanwhile, the people are often little more than hapless victims. They're there either to sell us an illusion, the ideal of the so-called living, breathing world, or they're targets – for violence, comedy, or perhaps both at once. *Watch Dogs Legion* at last gives them the opportunity to take centre stage, as you play the role of starmaker, picking one out from the crowd to recruit – and then, soon after, to become. You can be rich or poor, old or young, a middle-class espionage expert or a street-smart council-estate kid – not forgetting the women of Bletchley Park, who were hacking decades before DedSec. 'Play as anyone' is *Legion's* exciting and wildly ambitious pitch: "The three most challenging words of my career," creative director **Clint Hocking** tells us. ►

Game *Watch Dogs Legion*
Developer/publisher
Ubisoft (Toronto)
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Release March

It is, you have to say, a very Clint Hocking kind of idea. After all, he's well accustomed to confounding expectations. *Far Cry 2* is the quintessential case in point: from forcing the player to regularly take malaria jabs to making their guns jam at critical moments, he's always been fond of injecting a little unpredictability into tried-and-tested formulae. He's been in charge of the game at Ubisoft Toronto from day one – "Wow, almost four years ago," he says, as if even he's surprised how much time has passed since his arrival. When the studio's managing director, Alexandre Parizeau, first recruited him, it was partly for continuity's sake – the team that had started developing the original *Watch Dogs* was largely the same as that which Hocking had overseen on *Far Cry 2*. Parizeau needed someone he could trust in leading development as the series moved

might be dealing with: Hocking highlights an example of a man who's being blackmailed by a gang. Go a step further and add that person to your contacts list, and you gain details of friends and family members, alongside their daily schedule. Hocking points to a group of people on the screen. "If you were to pick any one of these people, you could follow them around, see them meeting with all their contacts, going for a drink in the pub maybe, or a jog on the waterfront – and then, say, meeting with their bookie in a back alley and making payments on their debt."

It sounds like a fanciful notion, but once it had first been floated, Hocking says, it soon felt like the only way forward. As the concept solidified, he and his team quickly reshuffled their list of potential settings. To

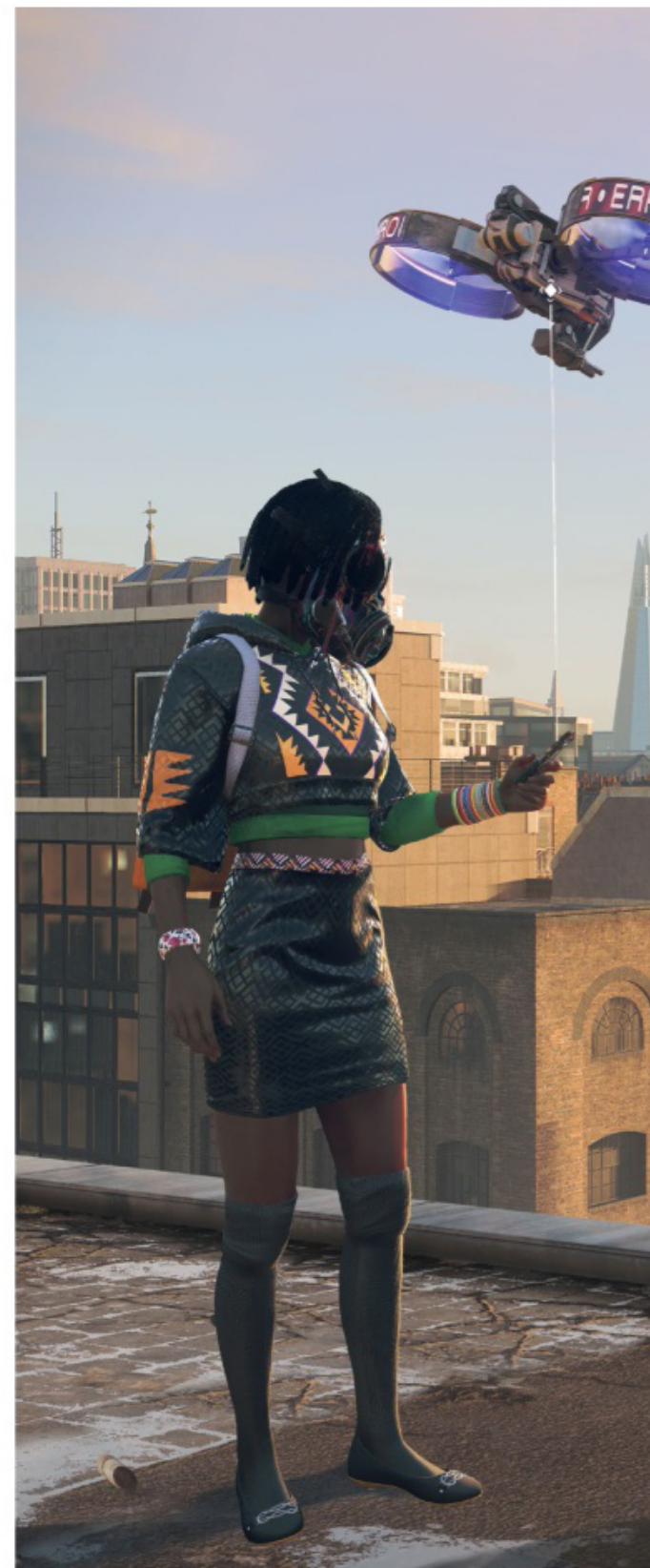
WE'VE HACKED INTO NPCs' PRIVATE LIVES THROUGH THEIR TECH, SO TAKING OVER THOSE LIVES ENTIRELY IS A LOGICAL NEXT STEP

over from Montreal. But he was also well aware that Hocking would offer something extra. "I told him, 'If you bring me in, we're going to do something really ambitious', Hocking laughs. "And he did, so we did."

And how. In many respects, *Legion* is a natural extension of what *Watch Dogs* has been doing since 2014. We've hacked into NPCs' phones and webcams, intruding into their private lives through their tech, so taking over those lives entirely is a logical next step – albeit a large and technically complicated one. (The studio has had some help, of course: teams at Montreal, Paris, Bucharest and Kiev are all working alongside Ubisoft Toronto, while in Newcastle, Reflections is handling *Legion*'s vehicles and driving model.) Here, every piece of data you see when you profile a character is part of the game's simulation. You'll see their name, age, job and any current social issues they

make the most of its big idea, *Watch Dogs Legion* needed a vibrant city with character and flavour, a place of rich cultural and ethnic diversity. "London quickly shot to the top of that list," Hocking says. "And once those two ideas crossed, it really felt like a no-brainer very, very quickly."

But the London of *Watch Dogs Legion* is not London as we know it today. The game's speculative fiction puts us sometime in the 2020s – Hocking is keen not to get too specific about dates, but suffice to say, the capital is not in a good way. It's a time of deep social crisis, when the rise of automation and artificial intelligence has sent the country's economy into a downward spiral, leaving millions out of work – and not just blue-collar workers. The pound has been supplanted by cryptocurrency, and organised crime is rife, with gangs uniting to form large and dangerous families. People ►





One of the five major story threads centres on the mystery of what happened to the original incarnation of DedSec London, while another will focus on the Blume Corporation and the rise of automation. We'll also hear from DedSec's international cells. "We have supporting characters that you talk to online from Sydney, Seoul and Cairo. You only get hints at it, but these events aren't just happening in London"

"LONDON IS ONE OF THE MOST-WATCHED CITIES IN THE WORLD, BUT IT'S ALSO NOW BECOMING ONE OF THE MOST DEPRESSED"



Your DedSec recruits will really feel like a team, Hocking says. "Everybody's working the problem together. It's a collective effort, all the time"

are being taken from their homes and sent to deportation centres. "London is one of the most-watched cities in the world, but it's also now becoming one of the most depressed," Hocking says. "The Met have been massively defunded, the military is being drawn down and a private military force called Albion has taken over policing in the city." Meanwhile, surveillance is being used to spy on the population, with dissenters being flagged and persistent offenders, well, disappeared.

It's a scenario not unfamiliar to dystopian fiction, though its powder-keg politics are unusual for a publisher that has studiously avoided discussing any political elements in its games. It's a surprise, then, when Hocking mentions the 'B' word before we even get a chance to ask him about it. "We went to London for a long research trip in the February before the Brexit vote," he recalls. "At that point, no one was even really talking about it, and then it came upon us pretty suddenly. So we had to kind of roll with the evolving political climate."

So yes, *Watch Dogs Legion* could well be the first post-Brexit blockbuster. Here, the UK is no longer part of the European Union, and people who aren't British citizens are being kicked out. In *Legion*, The Oval cricket ground (here renamed after a fictional car company) has been repurposed as a deportation centre. "It's a pre-clearance centre for sending people back to the European Union," Hocking says. "And bureaucracy is swamped and overrun, so it's become kind of a slum. And that's one of our main locations in the world."

And yet, as crowds of protesters with placards make plain, this is more a story about the one percent versus the 99 (indeed, thanks to *Legion's* unique hook, you *are* the 99 percent) rather than the current 52/48 split. In other words, Brexit might be part of the game's backstory, but it's not the most important part. "It's more about global issues," Hocking says. "The rise of authoritarianism, increasing automation, people being displaced, the separation of rich and poor and the increasing wealth gap, and how that's impacting the entire world. Those were our themes [before Brexit], and they're still our themes." ►

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International

Watch Dogs: Legion's immigration posters recall the Home Office's infamous 'go home' vans. "The government has become completely ineffective," says Hocking. Alright, Clint, no need to rub it in

CROWD CONTROL



TRUE BRIT

When work started on *Legion*, *Watch Dogs 2* was only in its pre-alpha stage, though Hocking acknowledges its influence, particularly with regard to its colour palette and sense of humour. "It really pressured us to make sure we didn't fall into that clichéd notion of London being this grey, rainy, drab place, and forced us to focus on the vibrancy, character and culture of the people because that's as much a part of our game as the physical location." British TV shows have also been a major influence, especially *Black Mirror* and *Monty Python*. "We looked at Python's approach to dark political commentary, which it handles with this absurdist perspective. It's been a long journey of research to really *get* the British response to extraordinary adversity – to have it feel at once dark, but also delightful and inspiring."



Legion is, pardon the pun, a game of drones: they fill the skies, from cargo drones you can ride to news craft capturing street protests to delivery and combat variants



Having grown from a hacker collective to a much larger resistance movement, DedSec represents a solution of sorts – if not to all those problems, then at least a start towards fixing some of them, a way for people from different backgrounds and beliefs to put aside their differences and fight for a common cause. As such, those unfortunates in the Oval are likely to be particularly sympathetic to your cause. But even here you can't just select a character and become them: every individual has problems, and first you must solve them. Hocking uses an example where a character's sister needs medical treatment. "So I can go to the hospital, prioritise your sister's healthcare treatment, pay her medical bills, and that will make your sister like me more, but it will also make you like me more." That will encourage them to ask you for help with something trickier, which will generate what Hocking calls a "heavily templated" mission; complete that, and you'll be able to recruit them. That's the long version. In other cases, you might

diverse traits and abilities. Each character, Hocking says, will represent "a unique build that you can customise to allow you to approach the challenges of the game any way you want." In other words, you can spread a wide range of perks between your crew rather than being forced down a particular path, giving you more flexibility in your approach to any given mission.

Though each recruit has their own quirks, they fall under three main classes. Infiltrators are stealth-focused and take advantage of a new addition to *Watch Dogs*' fiction: an AR device developed by the Blume Corporation, controller of the CTOS operating system from the previous two games, which everyone owns – "a sort of personal next-generation mobile device," Hocking says. Infiltrators can cloak themselves by hacking into those AR devices, to 'delete' themselves from view. By the same token, they can use AR cloaking to hide bodies rather than going through the old routine of dragging them into bushes or stuffing them in lockers.



YOU CAN SPREAD A WIDE RANGE OF PERKS BETWEEN YOUR CREW RATHER THAN BEING FORCED DOWN A PARTICULAR PATH

merely come to the aid of someone who's being assaulted by Albion goons, and they'll happily join you there and then.

Not all potential allies are equal; nor is there necessarily a correlation between the effort required to recruit one and their overall utility. You might well get lucky and find a valuable asset that doesn't need much encouragement to join the cause. With others, it's clear you're wasting your time trying to change their mind. The point being, you're free to choose – if you're keen on creating a team of one particular archetype, you can. Though filling your squad with octogenarians might not be the best idea: it behooves you to assemble a team with

Hackers are more of a hybrid, able to complete tasks remotely, but capable of switching easily between infiltration and aggression. That's partly thanks to their class ability, a spider-bot which can double as a turret when needed, and their ability to hijack combat drones. "It makes them fairly formidable in battle," Hocking says, "Especially if you use perks to double down on some of those things – like the Spider Army perk, which allows you to have multiple spider-bots. And there's another where you can directly control the turret on the spider as opposed to it being automated."

Finally, for those who prefer to go loud, there are Enforcers, who have access to heavy weapons, as well as a sticky mine ▶

that can be used to set traps. It's non-lethal, too; indeed, fully half the weapons in the game fall into this category, which is divided into four sub-categories including concussion and gas-based options, representing an even bigger shift away from traditional guns than *Watch Dogs 2*. That, Hocking admits, was partly informed by the setting. "One of the big challenges with setting the game in London was, 'How do we deal with police in a city where the police don't even carry guns in most situations?'" This in turn led to the introduction of Albion, with the police essentially limited to an investigative branch of this new and powerful PMC, and also a more involved melee combat system, with dodging and blocking, grappling and combos; no one-button takedowns here. Hocking is keen to point out that lethal options are still available where necessary. "However you want to play is really important to us," he says. "But it's more than that. It's whoever you want to be."

This is a point he keeps returning to, and little wonder. An enormous amount of time and effort has gone into individualising each potential player character, so that any one of them can become the star of the story. As Hocking puts it, "There's no dude on the box who's there to start all the cinematics and the people you recruit are just the supporting cast." Whoever you're controlling, whether they're a Shoreditch hipster or a middle-aged gangster, will appear and perform in the cutscenes you see. There are, Hocking says, 20 different versions of *Legion's* script. "And I don't just mean people saying the same lines. We're talking different characters, different personas, different voices, different *acting*."

All of which raises an obvious question: how? "We're using technology to alter all the voices so that even if you happen to recruit Joe and John and they have the same actor and the same personality, when they talk to each other, you won't know it's the same actor because we modulate the voices," he says. The studio has used photogrammetry to capture dozens of different faces, which have been combined using innovative animation techniques to produce "literally thousands" of unique heads. Couple that ▶



Legion will feature fourplayer online co-op, Hocking says. "It's an important part of the *Watch Dogs* legacy, and we're going to talk a lot more about our live offering after E3"

A character with a red mohawk and a mask with a circular visor is riding a motorcycle. They are wearing a black leather jacket with a red collar and white sneakers. They are holding a handgun in their right hand. The background is a city street at night with Union Jack flags hanging across the street, streetlights, and a car. A news ticker on the left side of the image reads: "BREAKING NEWS Thomas Gray WANTED FOR ARMED ROBBERY! ELI USING SEE SAY APP. IF YOU SEE THIS PERSON, REPORT TO THE POLICE".

"THE STAKES IN THIS GAME ARE VERY REAL...
[PEOPLE] CAN BE CAPTURED, THEY CAN BE
WOUNDED, AND THEY CAN EVEN BE KILLED"

CENSUS SENSIBILITY

A huge database, internally referred to as Census, helps determine character backstories. Information is essentially delivered on demand: Census builds up a more detailed profile the longer you focus on them. "When you see a guy on a street corner, that's just a character that's spawned in the world," Hocking says. "But then if you look at that person and start profiling them, then we start filling in the blanks. He has this animation archetype, he's one of these nationalities and he has this job, so his income is at this level, which means he lives in one of these possible neighbourhoods. The more you dig into the person, the more the database constrains itself and narrows possibilities until everything is locked in."





with the clothing variants, and the diverse lifestyles and profiles for each character, and Hocking reckons that there are so many different possible combinations in *Legion's* simulation of London that you'll never encounter the same person twice: "Whether you choose some suave, sophisticated secret agent dude, or some 80-year-old lady that you saw feeding pigeons in the park, your story is going to be uniquely yours."

With great choice comes great responsibility, of course, which brings us to *Legion's* other big idea: permadeath. "The stakes in this game are very real and very high," Hocking says, ominously. "If you're reckless, if one of your characters gets in over their head, bringing a knife to a gunfight – maybe don't try to do an

desk and go mourn for a few minutes because I was pretty upset."

Keeping any one character alive for the duration of the game should be quite the challenge. *Legion* has five main quest lines, comprising more than 60 missions, adding up to around 60 hours of story. "We don't know exactly yet, because we're all still playing the game right now," Hocking says. "But there's a full narrative Ubisoft game here." That's a point on which he's particularly insistent: the game's central idea may be a pretty radical one, but nothing from the previous games has been sacrificed to achieve it. This is still a *Watch Dogs* game, and still a Ubisoft open-world game, with all that represents. The shift from a numbered title "isn't that important", he says; it's more symbolic of the game's broader

"OUR UNIVERSE AND OUR FICTION IS MOVING MORE TOWARDS SUPPORTING THE IDEA THAT THERE'S A GLOBAL RESISTANCE HAPPENING"

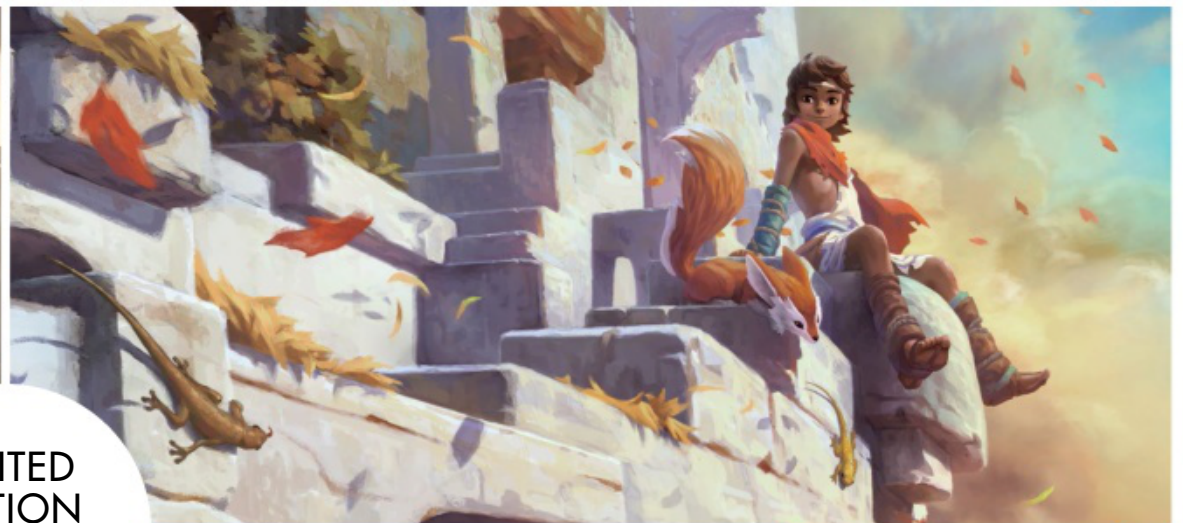
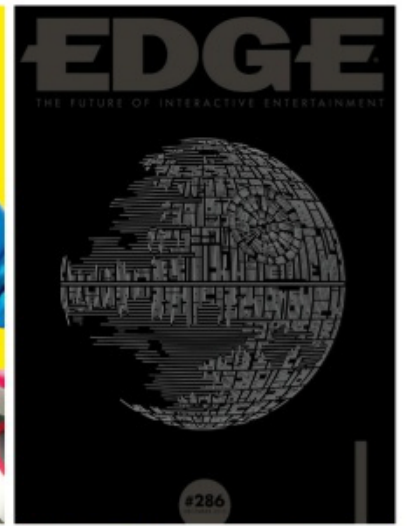
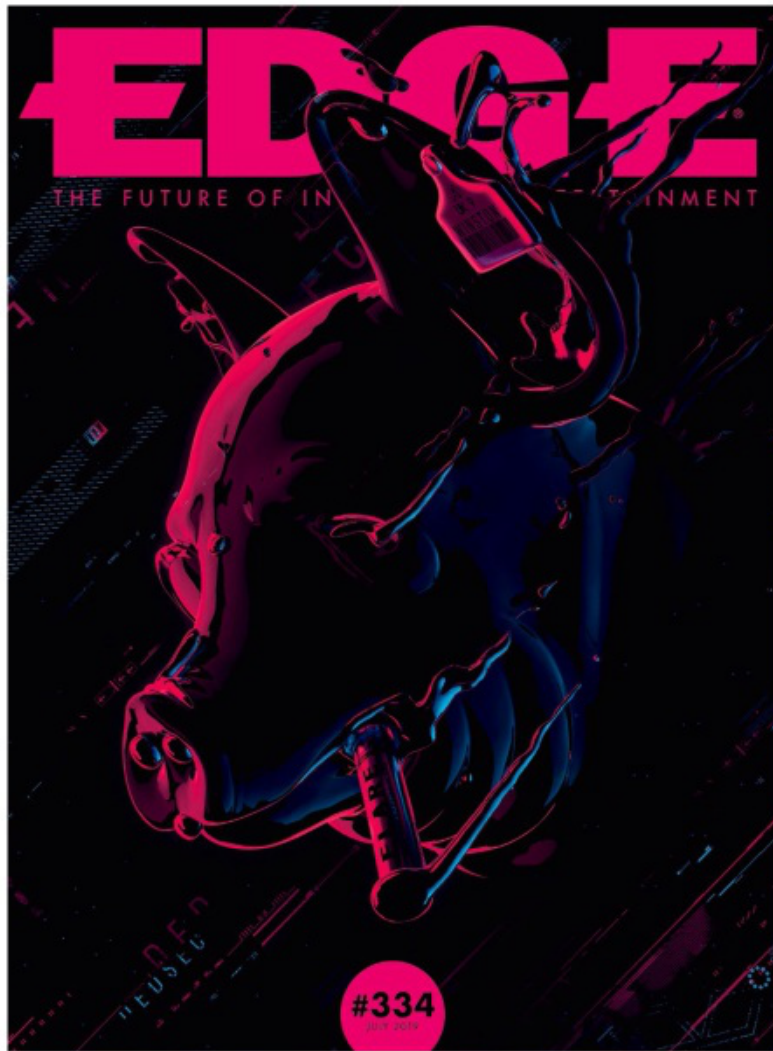
Enforcer's job with an Infiltrator – then they can be captured, they can be wounded, and they can even be killed." The decision to allow characters to die forever came surprisingly early, he says. The ability to recruit anyone within the world was always likely to lead to problems – there would be no sense of jeopardy, for starters – and so the studio settled upon a maximum team size of 20 that often falls below that figure.

This naturally encourages players to take a little more care, Hocking says, and when you've grown attached to a specific character, death carries more of a sting than it would in other open-world games where you can simply respawn and continue. "Just the other day I lost one of my best characters that I've been playing with for quite some time," he tells us. "I lost her because of a bug, too. I fell into the Thames, and I guess something was broken with the geometry because I couldn't get out of the river, and I was being hosed by a drone with a shotgun. And so she died, and I was crushed." He laughs. "Like, I had to walk away from my

scope. "Even though the game is focused in London, there are other DedSec cells, and I think our universe and our fiction is moving more towards supporting the idea that there's a global resistance happening. So I think that it's a change of *kind* rather than an incremental change." So does that mean *Legion's* format could potentially translate to other cities? "I mean, we'll see what we do after this one," he laughs.

Hocking recognises there's a lot at stake, and that it's been a challenging journey for him and his team. But with the game's official unveiling ten days away when we speak, he seems in confident form. "It was a huge dream and a huge ambition," he says. "Even when the words probably first came out of my mouth, I don't think I really meant it. But as we started digging into this all-or-nothing proposition, and we saw how exciting but also how terrible it was... it's the kind of thing that you desperately want to try. But you're scared shitless of doing it." He pauses for a moment, as if weighing up the pros and cons anew. "So: let's do it." ■

Infiltrator classes can gain perks that improve their melee capabilities – a useful way to recover from failed attempts at stealth without causing the kind of alert that inevitably results from a shootout



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AN AUDIENCE WITH...

SIOBHAN REDDY

Media Molecule's studio director
explains what it means to work at
the coalface of Dreams

ALEX WILTSHIRE





CV

Born in South Africa and brought up in Australia, the first game on which Siobhan Reddy worked was *Discworld Noir* at London-based Perfect Entertainment. In 1999 she joined up with Criterion in Guildford, where she co-produced *Burnout 3: Takedown* and then managed development on *Burnout: Revenge*. As part of Guildford's creative community, she met Kareem Ettouney, Mark Healey, David Smith and Alex Evans, who were working at Lionhead, and took their offer to join them as they founded Media Molecule in 2006. She was named as one of the most powerful women in the UK by BBC Radio 4's Woman's Hour, and Australian Woman Of The Year by Qantas in 2013, as well as being given the Innovator award at the Microsoft Women In Gaming Awards in 2014.

While it's easy to admire the eccentric invention and imagination that forms the foundations of *LittleBigPlanet*, *Tearaway* and *Dreams*, none of these milestone games would exist if it wasn't for **Siobhan Reddy**. One of Media Molecule's five directors, she took the role of producer, marshalling wild thickets of ideas and technology into games which could actually be made, and then ensuring they actually were. And if that wasn't enough, she also led the studio itself, building its corporate culture and team and steering its growth as not only one of the UK's premier – and most distinctive – game developers, but also one of its most diverse. After 13 years, all five of its directors still work together, a testament to her ability to thread the needle of enabling sustainable and yet ambitious creation. Here, ahead of a keynote session at Develop: Brighton in July, she talks about how she's helped to engineer a studio that's been able to maintain that balance, how to herd cats, and why mucking in with everyone else is crucial to getting a game out of the door.

You both manage the studio and still actively produce games. Those are two very different roles, especially at a company as big as Media Molecule.

Actually all five of us directors are still hands-on. That's been something that we have all wanted to maintain, because as people we all move between the high level and the granular. At the moment, I am producing the Dreamiverse part of *Dreams* because I'm down a producer, so I'm actually doing more production right now than I have done in quite some time. And I just love it! I was just saying yesterday, like, I really don't really want to give it up, but I know I have to. In a normal world, I manage the production team, and I'm very involved in ensuring that we have a plan and that I'm talking through it with each of the producers. Then I always pick up stuff when they need support. If we need bugs to be assigned, I'm really happy to jump in there.

To me, that's a slightly selfish thing, because it allows me to get into the granularity of the project, and that's the way that I truly understand the state of it. I try to find ways to do that while not getting in the other producers' way. I'm sure I *do* get in their way sometimes, so looking after the Dreamiverse is brilliant. I'm enjoying it, and the timing of it is really good because we're all working in this new way, where we've got *Dreams*' early access launched and we're working towards regular

"ONE OF THE BEST PIECES OF ADVICE I WAS GIVEN WHEN I JOINED THE INDUSTRY WAS TO ALWAYS STICK WITH THE TROOPS"

updates. I feel like I need to understand all this in order to be able to advocate it, and also so I can ask other people to do that job. I don't like asking anyone to do something that I would not be willing to do, so part of me liking to muck in with the production team is because I don't want ever to be too far away from them and understanding the reality of their jobs. And it *also* helps me understand the reality and the state of the project.

One of the best pieces of advice I was given when I joined the industry was to always stick with the troops in the trenches and not to become one of those managers who were off, far away, telling people what to do but not actually getting their hands dirty. I've probably taken that a bit too literally, but that's very much a core part of who I am and how I work. To be fair, the other directors are actually very similar in that we're all quite hands-on people.

Each of the other directors has a very individual personality. There's Alex Evans the creative programmer, David Smith the programmer-designer, Mark Healey the designer and Kareem Ettouney the artist. Has managing that balance of creative talent partly shaped your role?

Oh, if you only knew! Yeah, I mean, we work together really brilliantly as a team, and my role... So, here's the thing. I think that what all of us really love, and you need to love it if you're going to work at Media Molecule, is the frenetic energy of creating stuff. We don't quite know whether it's going to work out, and you're going to have to work hard to solve all the problems its design brings up. With that kind of ground-up approach – and I think most game companies are a little bit like this – you need to enjoy a little bit of chaos. My job, I think, is to make sure that we have just enough chaos to be able to stay in that place, but just enough structure that we



don't go off the rails. I've often described it as herding cats. Sometimes I'm very much encouraging one of them to go off-piste, because something's not working about what we're doing or it's become a bit stale, and sometimes I'm actively trying my very best to rein them in. Sometimes we're all completely aligned; sometimes I need to pitch them on a way of working or a goal that we've got to hit; and sometimes it's one of them pitching me something that needs to happen.

But we're all very aligned on what the project basically is at any one time. And we're very aligned on Media Molecule's goals and where we're going. But I sometimes think the day-to-day of that is a bit like choreography, because I come in and I'm like, 'Okay, what's the flow today?' Alex might come in with a really brilliant idea that he really wants to try out, and sometimes you have to capture that essence in the raw moment, rather than saying to him, "No, you're scheduled to do something else, so you need to hold that thought and then have the same energy in six weeks' time." Sometimes that's just not the best way to work. So yes, it's a constantly evolving relationship, and my job is to sometimes hold the line, and sometimes break it.

How has Media Molecule managed to retain such a consistent group of lead creatives for so long?

We always put fit as a very high priority when we hire people. That's the main way we've achieved it. Culture is built, you know, by people. Right at the beginning, we set goals like making creative games and the games we wanted to, and for Media Molecule to be a family-friendly studio. And in those first few years, we cemented a vibe that was very much created by the

people that were there. Most of those people are still here, and when I look at Media Molecule now, I really think that everybody still holds those same principles. I appreciate that if you join Media Molecule and you're not into it, you're *seriously* not going to be into it. But for some game companies, if you don't fit then you're considered rubbish. Here, it's not that, it's just that sometimes you don't need a death-metal drummer in a jazz band.

So we need people who are creatively simpatico and also want to go on a certain creative journey, because we're quite niche. Making creative games and tools is very different from other types of games that a lot of developers really want to make, but that also means that a lot of people who apply to us are already attracted to the culture. And we've always looked at different types of people, as well, such as people who don't have traditional games experience. Having a diverse team has always been really important. We've been very open to finding interesting, creative people who may not have the traditional experience to join us, because the kinds of games we're making are not traditional experiences.

Media Molecule's team is roughly one-third female. Are you still part of upholding that principle and pushing it forward?

Yeah, I'm very much part of that. I'm not the only the only person who cares about it, obviously, but I think the thing that I've learned is that everything takes work. You can't just have an idea, and it doesn't matter how simple the idea is, every single thing takes work. There was definitely a point where I felt like we were not seeing CVs coming through from women, and so we started to ►





try a bunch of different things. We've looked at the language of our job adverts, we have looked at where we hire from, and I guess I was able to make some big decisions. In 2013 I was put on the BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour Power List, and following that I had a lot of people talking to me about joining various boards and getting involved in high-level initiatives to bring more women into the industry. All of them were really brilliant, but I realised that the one area where I was actually able to have an idea and then implement that idea quickly was here at Media Molecule. So we started trying lots of things, like saying yes to internships. We hadn't done any before, and then we got a brilliant showreel through from an artist called Emilie Stabell, and she became a catalyst, because then I was able to say, "Look at this brilliant young artist, she's a great candidate for us to start our internship program."

We started to say yes to work experience, especially from girls' schools, and it's been wonderful to see a talk that I did at a school resulting in someone getting work experience here, which then resulted in an internship, and which will now hopefully turn into something much longer. Seeing the road that young programmer has taken, it's all been led by her, with us just saying yes to things.

After the Radio 4 thing, lots of school groups got in touch with us and asked if they could bring classes here, and while we couldn't say yes to everybody, we said it as much as we could. Lucy Black, who was running that program at the time, had a rule that if it was a co-ed school, the party had to be 50-50 male-female. And that was a really interesting rule, because what it meant that young girls and boys from different disciplines could be exposed to each other, and all the different disciplines that come into making games. We think it's so obvious that there are composers that work in videogames, but if you're a young person you may not have figured that out yet. And if you're really good at maths, you're usually encouraged to do accountancy, whereas you could be a graphics programmer, be a rock star. And we've very much encouraged people within the studio, both men and women, to speak at conferences about what they feel passionate about.

It's about putting in the effort to make sure that we weren't just expecting the funnel to change. Obviously, in our games, we very much make an effort to ensure creativity is for everybody. It's not gendered and we want to bring everybody, young and old and all genders, to it, so another reason why all this is important to us is that our audience is everybody, so as a studio we should reflect that.

"THERE'S NO PROBLEM THAT'S SO BIG THAT YOU CAN'T SOLVE IT BY GETTING AROUND A TABLE AND CHATTING ABOUT IT"

We remember that when we visited the old studio, above the tile shop, you had a big wooden kitchen table at the top of the stairs and that there were team members' kids running around it. It was a reflection of the family-friendly principle you mentioned, but do the same techniques and measures still work today?

We probably still have that table! But now we've levelled up and we now have three tables, and we have two chefs to cook us lunch every day. Right from the very beginning, I was very big on the fact that we needed a way to be able to talk to each other, that idea of getting around the table, because there's no problem that's so big that you can't solve it by getting around a table and chatting about it. I still have that philosophy and I wish email would disappear. But know that that ship has probably sailed a little bit.

Slack hasn't solved it, either.

Yeah, Slack has made production's life even worse, because it's just basically deconstructed email, and it's now in 50 different channels. But anyway, we're 13 years old now and we have become a truly multi-generational workforce. We now have people ranging from 18 to close to 60 here. If there's one thing I've learned by making games, it's that as we all age, our priorities change. I have always wanted to have a studio where our best people didn't get to the point where they had to leave because they weren't able to spend enough time with their families, or they weren't getting enough time to go to the museum to get inspired, or they weren't getting enough time to go to the gym to be healthy. That to me is just counterproductive.

I really love the current trend, where we can talk about all this being a professional career. We've had HR right from the very beginning because it's always been really important to me to have an impartial person for the team to talk to, and also to keep us in check a bit. ►



Reddy was executive producer on both *LittleBigPlanet* and *LittleBigPlanet 2*

Our current HR manager, Gráinne, comes from outside of games, and it's been really brilliant to have someone with a fresh perspective, to highlight some of the stuff that we do really well and also to bring in some of the things which happen in the world outside. I like the industry getting older, and I like that as the industry matures, we look for work practices that are kind to our teams — and are also kind to our creativity, because being creative is hard. It takes effort and we have to not burn people out. If I think about big differences between then and now, it would be that we are even more family-friendly and that we have very flexible ways of working. People have to deliver their work, but I'm very open to suggestions of different ways of doing it if it helps them deliver their best work and also achieve a happy life.

But interestingly, there was a point where we were ageing up, and one of the things that was really brilliant about two interns we hired, I've mentioned Emilie, and the second intern we hired was Maja-Lisa Kehlet Hansen, an artist, and the same time we hired instrumental young programmers Bogdan Vera and Liam de Valmency. Those four were all in their early 20s and they came in and just gave us a breath of fresh air. And we were suddenly like, "Oh my god, we need this. We need young people, because they've got very different ideas to us." We had got to the point where maybe the average age was in the 30s, and it was really good to make it a goal to look at the diversity within the generations, because you get some really interesting conversations and differences.

Media Molecule's directors are all very highly respected, creative people. How do you ensure the voices of these young new recruits manage to be heard above theirs and percolate throughout the studio? Do you have to organise meetings to make it happen, or does it happen organically?

It's mostly organic, and I think it comes from hiring people that we feel would naturally jive with the culture. When I look at the younger generation, like Rosabelle Armstead, who's a programmer and our newest ex-intern, and the influence that Bogdan, Liam, Maja and Emilie had, they've all been the most junior people in the company, but their influence on the games was on par with Alex, Dave, Kareem's and Mark's. We always wanted to have a system here where it doesn't matter what level you are within the company, you can influence the projects you're working on. But we still have work to do on that. I don't come into Media Molecule every day and think, "Oh, everything's done. It's all great. The culture's working, the game's great, the people are great." It's a constant work in progress, and as you asked that, I was thinking, yeah, I know that there still things that we need to address, and there are people who have concerns about different aspects. We might not have achieved everything yet, but that doesn't mean that we don't intend at some point to make sure that people are heard. I do surveys every couple of years and they are a good way to gather information and get a temperature check on where everybody's at, what the major issues are that we need to resolve, and the best things that we should amplify. But other than that we do it through talking. So

there's nothing structural, but was I talking to Ru [Weerasuriya, CEO] at Ready At Dawn yesterday and he was talking about these culture meetings they have, and I was like, "Oh, that sounds interesting," but we've not ever tried to do something that structured. Maybe it's a good time for us to start.

So I'm always open to ideas, and I want to make sure everybody's heard. My schtick as the studio director is that I love it when I feel like everybody feels like they're contributing. If you've been to a party where everybody brings something, I think the act of that, whether it's a plate of food or drink or whatever, it makes people feel like they can rummage around your kitchen. I love that feeling. I'm happiest when people just feel like they can open the cupboard in my house and do whatever they want. I feel like that about here. I want people to feel like it's not just our company, or our studio, it's all of our studio. Of course there's structure, and of course all that stuff exists, but it should exist only to help us move forward, not to hold us back.

As Media Molecule's first live game, designed to run as a service, how has *Dreams* changed your role, given that you're on the front line of developing it?

I think I've learned more in making *Dreams* than I have doing anything else. One way of looking at *Dreams* is that it's a vast Photoshop, and I've needed to understand the project to be able to ship it. There was a point a couple of years ago, when we at production and QA were getting our heads around the scope of it and figuring out what it would take to ship it. We needed to name everything and have it in a spreadsheet, so that we could understand it, because up until that point, we'd danced around that task a little bit because we knew that it was going to be a really big thing to do. But then, you know, the joy is diving into it. It took a few weeks, but then we were able to show the team and say, "This is the thing that we're making." I remember thinking, "Wow, this is massive."

In the same way that I have to produce to understand the game we're making, I also have to use the game, or play the game we're making, to understand how to ship it. In *LittleBigPlanet*, I'd never really needed to get into the detail of all of the Poppit menus, because they were only a couple of layers deep. But in *Dreams*, the most interesting stuff is when you go deep, so we had to go deeper and deeper, and I ended up learning a lot more about the creative tools and using them a lot more than I did on *LittleBigPlanet*. It sounds mad, but doing the spreadsheet was really pleasurable, but then also learning the tools was really pleasurable alongside that, just understanding how everything worked. So yeah, that was the point where I realised the scope of it, and

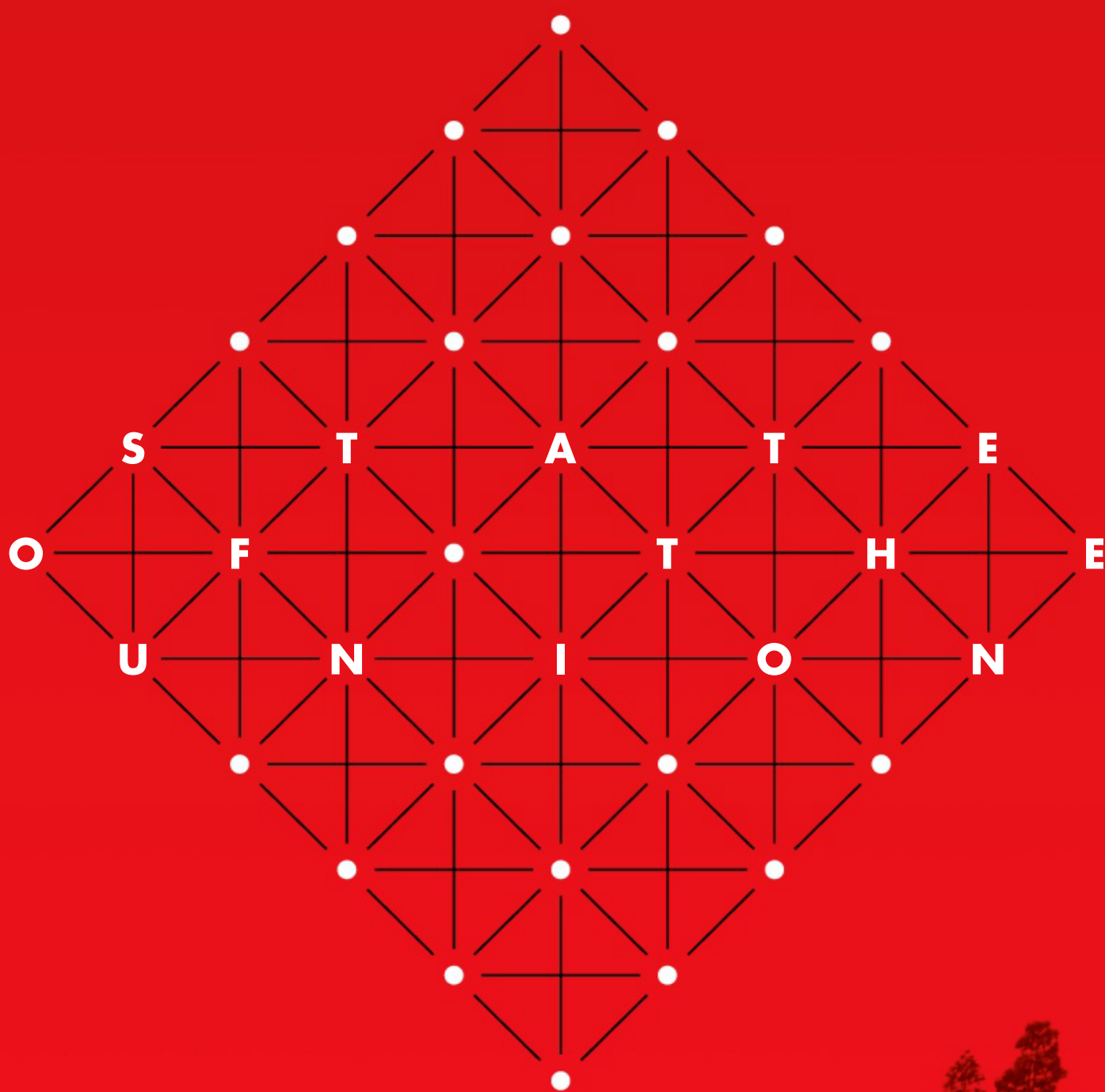
"MY SCHTICK AS THE STUDIO DIRECTOR IS THAT I LOVE IT WHEN I FEEL LIKE EVERYBODY FEELS THEY'RE CONTRIBUTING"

that to understand it is to be a part of it, and I couldn't be on the outskirts. So I became a lot more involved in the day-to-day production.

On the other side of that we have things like outreach. We were getting interest from game developers and from different partners, and we were starting up that branch of the team while working towards this idea of a live service. Each of these areas, as they mushroomed up, I had to get involved for a time to understand them, until they were rolling. It's not that my job is really different now; it's still about people, product and process. But the product has more pillars than anything we've made before. We have a plan for *Dreams* which includes many things that aren't on the traditional game path, and that means zooming right out much further than before, while also zooming in to understand what it will take to ship it all, right down to each tool.

There's a point in a project when you finally see on the screen the thing you've been talking about. But with *Dreams*, with that idea of running a live service, we know what it is today, but where we'll be next year will probably be very different. That means we have to be very fluid with what we do each day, and I think my role will never be one where I'm like, "I'm coming in and I'm going to be the studio director, only going to worry about studio director things." There will be the days where I come in and be the Dreamiverse producer, and also studio director, and move them both on at the same time. I really, really love my job. I love that I am doing all these different things, and if I could have dreamed up a dream group of people to work with it would be them, and a dream project would be *Dreams*. I feel like we are getting to try out this thing that we've always wanted to do, which is to really bring creativity to people and making games; all the things that I loved as a teenager, just, like, weird theatre, mad music, all the things around on the fringes and a bit strange. I just love that I see them in the game we're making. So I guess there's a willingness from me for my job to be whatever *Dreams* needs it to be. ■





Developers discuss the case for unionising the game industry, the practicalities, and how unionisation might affect the art of game design

BY EDWIN EVANS-THIRLWELL

After a decade in game development, **Jon McKellan** has seen many sides of an increasingly divided industry. Prior to founding Glasgow-based No Code with his brother and a childhood friend, he served as lead UI designer on The Creative Assembly's *Alien: Isolation* and crafted UI and animation concepts for Rockstar's *Red Dead Redemption 2*. Now a weaver of shortform techno-horror yarns like *Stories Untold*, McKellan looks back on his larger projects fondly, but also with a certain rancour. "I think there's a thing where, because people enjoy the work, somehow it's okay to abuse that. You like making games, it's your passion, so fine – do it for 20 hours a day, what's the problem? I feel like I have been in this situation where because I'm passionate, I've been taken advantage of – the people paying the bills have said, 'Sure, stay late, stay late'. And I feel like the lack of unionisation has been a problem."

A game industry union – that's to say, an organisation of workers formed to protect the rights and interests of its members – might have highlighted and mobilised against such practices, ensuring that the occasional burst of overtime doesn't mushroom into a culture of overwork. "I do feel there are occasions where doing overtime is necessary, but not institutionalised overtime – 'We've contracted you to 35 hours a week, but we expect you to do 50, for the next five years,'" McKellan continues. "It's just exploitation." Unfortunately, large swathes of the industry remain distrustful of unionisation, as he has discovered firsthand. "I've seen employment contracts where [you're required] to not join a union. If there was one, you're not allowed to join it, and that's really shady to me."

Chris Avellone, the seasoned writer-designer whose works include *Fallout: New Vegas* and Respawn's forthcoming *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*,

has also come to see the point of unionisation. Besides challenging crunch, he argues that unions might force publishers to include departed employees in game credits, and provide legal resources and insight in the event of an unfair dismissal. "California has an 'at-will' hiring system where they can terminate you for any reason, and they never need to give an explanation," he says. "When that's happened to friends of mine, I know it would have helped had they been able to talk to someone with legal know-how to explain what rights they have in that situation – what you're entitled to, what you can ask for, what companies

can ask for. Companies can throw all sorts of things into a separation contract that are illegal. I've seen ones where it says 'You have ten days to sign this or else', and that's illegal. Having some legal counsel instantly available, I think, would be a lot of help to people in the industry."

Avellone argues that there's more at stake, however, than individual cases of poor treatment. He thinks that full unionisation would alter the very culture and production framework of the industry, sparking a shift in approaches across the board and perhaps, spelling doom for certain ways of making games. "I'm not naive enough to think that unions would solve everything," he says, "But I think it would help with mitigating crunch, in the sense that it would destroy a lot of big companies. But I don't think that would be a bad thing, because I think their methodology is flawed."

There has never been more discussion of game-industry unionisation than today, as censure mounts over cycles of mass layoffs and reports of abusive working practices at some of the biggest and most successful companies in the industry, among them Epic Games, Telltale and Netherrealm. In February 2018, approximately ►

half of *Steel Division* developer Eugen Systems went on strike over a series of payment disputes. In October, Rockstar's Dan Houser's enthusiastic claims of working "100-hour weeks" during development of *Red Dead Redemption 2* were met with a storm of criticism. Earlier this year, 150 employees at *League Of Legends* developer Riot Games downed tools in protest against the company's handling of grievances related to apparently endemic workplace sexism.

The past two years have seen the rise of Game Workers Unite, an international grassroots campaign for unionisation, building on the efforts of existing game-industry unions such as Le Syndicat Des Travailleurs Et Travailleuses Du Jeu Vidéo in France. GWU also takes inspiration from labour organisations outside the industry, including the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists. The latter initiated strikes against Activision, EA, Take-Two and others in 2016, demanding better compensation for actors and voice and motion-capture artists. After a record 340 days of protest involving hundreds of people, it negotiated a new bonus structure with the companies and a commitment to greater transparency in contracts.

For all this activism, however, there continues to be confusion among developers about what unions are for. As **Declan Peach**, vice-chair of Game Workers Unite UK, explains, the problem is partly that much union work involves individual grievances that may require confidentiality (as in the case of sexual harassment claims). But the broader difficulty is that as a platform for negotiations with employers, a union's role can be very complex – especially when it comes to a historically non-unionised industry where the largest projects typically involve teams in several countries, each with its own laws and workplace customs. "The reason we're segmented into chapters is that union law is very different [between countries], and we can't, both from a campaign perspective and a legal perspective, do the same things," Peach says.

In the US, for instance, it's much harder to achieve the legal recognition you need to form a union, and harder to get access to employment tribunals – government-appointed bodies that make decisions about claims that employers have acted unlawfully. American states write their own employment laws, semi-independently of the

federal government, some of which are more hostile to union action than others. "It varies state to state whether or not you can be fired without a valid reason," Peach adds. "But in the UK if somebody is fired without notice we can take it to an ACAS [the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, a public body offering free advice, support and services to both workers and employers] tribunal and argue discrimination."

On top of the legal considerations, popular sentiment in the US skews anti-union, making it tough to kindle discussions about labour organisation in a workplace without rousing the ire of colleagues or bosses. "In the US, unions are kind of taboo, more so than in the UK. I was speaking to the organisers during one of our training days, and they are far less willing to speak to different sections of different game companies, because they think that with the way companies in the US are organised, departments like HR and IT tend to be quite in bed with management.

That's not necessarily true for every company, but it's more true in the US than in the UK."

All of which is not to say that union action in the UK is straightforward, Peach adds.

"The UK has a really weird way of doing tribunals. You have to be a fulltime employee, meaning you have to work 40 hours a week, fulltime for a company, and not be on a zero-hours contract – and you have to do that for two years before you have the full range of employment rights. Before then, if you're unfairly dismissed and we as a union have to take it to tribunal, we're not allowed to do it for any reason other than underpayment or discrimination. It's just a weird aspect of union law in the UK, which means we come across as trying to shout about discrimination a lot, but in reality we need to make that argument because we can't make another one."

The struggle to define and pitch unionisation to developers aside, union activists also need to enlist the support of players – not just for unions in themselves, but for the idea that some games are simply not worth the human cost of their creation. This is tricky, of course, when you don't have the reach and publicity resources of a company like EA. "As long as they're getting fed their games, they're going to find it hard to rebel and say, 'Yeah, I'm with the developers, they shouldn't be doing these ►



Jon McKellan, founder and creative director at No Code

Revolutionary thinking

At the root of the game-industry unionisation debate is a fundamental disenchantment with capitalism as a social and economic system – a subject too large to properly explore here. As Kate Edwards suggests, the call for unions is on some level a demand for entire new models of production, particularly among junior developers who are more vulnerable to exploitation. “For the younger people I meet, the people who’ve just come into the industry, just exiting college, absolutely, I think that’s a huge impetus for them.” Game Workers Unite UK vice chair Declan Peach agrees, though he cautions that unions should remain “a wide tent”, open to all regardless of politics providing each member’s fundamental rights are respected. “I think every union needs to understand that the reasons union exist is to vie for a post-capitalist society. But very long-term!”



Chris Avellone, videogame designer and comic writer



TOP Last February's strike over wages at *Steel Dawn* creator Eugen Systems ended in defeat.
MAIN Reports by Eurogamer and Kotaku claimed that overtime was part of Rockstar's culture during the making of *RDR2*.
LEFT Riot Games' attempts to force the bringers of lawsuits into individual arbitration is a bid, strikers say, to turn employees against each other



Declan Peach, vice chair of Game Workers Unite UK



TOP Telltale closed its doors last September after investors AMC, Smilegate and Lionsgate pulled their funding, leaving around 250 people out of work without notice or severance pay.

MAIN Where Game Workers Unite in the US only campaigns for unionisation, the UK chapter is a branch of the International Workers Union of Great Britain.

BELOW Reports of crunch at Epic led ex-Netherrealm employees to speak up about conditions at the studio. Former software engineer James Longstreet says that the experience "nearly killed" him



Kate Edwards, Take This board member, Game Advocacy chief advocate, and former executive director of the International Game Developers Association



kinds of things,” McKellan tells us. “People were saying the other day that there’s a huge crunch culture at Epic on *Fortnite*. The people buying those battle passes don’t really care. And to be honest they shouldn’t, it’s not their problem. They’re just consuming the entertainment, they’re buying the product. But while that appetite is there people are going to want to satisfy it, and people are going to get caught under the wheels doing that. I don’t think a union on its own will solve it.”

It’s possibly a question of how the debate is framed. Sympathetic players may understand that unionisation can help address the industry’s widely documented problems with crunch, for example, but may be less conscious of how improving the lot of developers can benefit the games they enjoy. On the contrary, the industry and community remain somewhat in thrall to the myth that great art is necessarily tethered to absurd self-sacrifice, which benefits those who would rather workers lacked a collective voice with which to argue for more respectful treatment. According to luminaries such as Naughty Dog co-founder Jason Rubin and *Deus Ex* creator Warren Spector, overwork is a sad but inevitable component of a creative process dogged by uncertainty. It’s true that game development can be messy, with a huge amount of prototyping and iteration often required to establish whether an idea is worth the trouble, and then four more years of hard work on something that only really begins to resemble a shippable product in the final stretch. But it’s also true that treating developers like cogs in a machine doesn’t lead to a better game.

Speaking to **Edge** during a presentation at this year’s Reboot Develop conference, former International Game Developers Association executive director **Kate Edwards** argues that romanticising crunch is often just a way of excusing mismanagement. Too many projects, she says, are reduced to cauldrons of overwork because leads ask for changes or new features out of the blue, or dither over issues that require a quick decision. “A lot of these problems, frankly [are because of] managers who are not managers. These are people who are not trained to do business development, they don’t have a background in it — they may have started at the company as a programmer some years ago and risen through the ranks, and suddenly they find themselves in senior leadership roles just because they’ve been around for a long time.”

The benefits of crunch in itself are highly overrated. According to a 2008 study of an anonymous company by the game developer Clinton Keith, after five weeks of working six days a week for ten hours a day, employees were less productive than during a standard 40-hour week. According to another piece of research by Mothership Entertainment boss Paul Tozour in 2015, there is, in fact, a correlation between overwork and lower Metacritic averages and return on investment. In the long term, crunch has also led to an industry-wide brain drain, as eager, talented graduates grow up to become weary, bitter veterans, many affected by anxiety and depression. “A huge number of game-industry professionals tend to move industry after three to five years,” Declan Peach says. “The reason veterans are so sought after is that there aren’t that many.”

The strain has only intensified as the industry has become ever more dependent on service revenue models, which oblige teams to carry on tweaking and creating game content for months, if not years, after they ship. Media coverage of the situation hasn’t always helped. There has been a series of rigorous reports on the state of working conditions at larger studios, such as BioWare and Telltale, but these often frame bad treatment of employees as exclusive to critical and commercial failures, rather than commonplace throughout the industry.

More insidiously, relentless news coverage of game-as-service updates and denunciations of those (such as *Apex Legends*) that aren’t updated as often adds to the pressure on overworked teams.

In giving developers more power to resist open or tacit expectations around overtime, unionisation might then lead to a higher grade of game, though it’s important to restate that unions exist for the sake of developers, not products. “I think the games overall would be of better quality, because many studies have been done of how people work under stress, and you do better work when you’re not under stress,” Peach says. “I can tell you having known many big game developers, we all produce better work when we have more time to do it.” Beyond that, it’s fascinating to consider how the art of game design might alter in qualitative terms if workers were shielded against the toil represented as mandatory for the creation of a game of such scope as *Red Dead Redemption 2*. ►

“I don’t think we’d see games on the scale that we’re seeing them – the huge triple-A open world things, the *Red Dead*s, the *Far Cry* series, that kind of thing,” Jon McKellan muses. “Those games are hard to build in the time you have already, and it takes them seven years. If we were unionised to the point where everyone worked normal hours on productions like that, they’re going to take twice as long and they’re not going to be financially viable any more. They’re not going to make the money back, and it would take too long to get them out. So I think games would just get smaller – and I’m all for that, because I don’t have time to play massive games any more! I’d like to make them smaller, you play a few hours and you feel like you’ve had your fill.” He adds that “we’re trying a bit too hard to put ‘endless’ content into things, to the point where it’s almost like, if everything’s in the game then nothing’s special any more. It’s just this mess of mechanics.”

These are conclusions echoed by **Sébastien Bénard**, a game designer at *Dead Cells* developer MotionTwin. The studio is intriguingly placed to comment on the effects of unionisation because it is a workers’ cooperative: its employees are all paid the same, work equal hours, and have a say on every major development decision. It thus offers a snapshot, however extreme, of how a unionised industry might function, with power siphoned away from managers to the workforce – and as Bénard concedes, it’s a model that has limits.

For one thing, this approach is hardly practical for a company on the scale of, say, Ubisoft Montreal, which at the last public count employed 3,500 people. “We actually decided at one point to embrace this limit and say, okay, we cannot grow, for example, to a team of 20 people. We are just limited to around ten.” Bénard prefers to see this as a constructive hindrance, however. “It’s like with a game jam: you have 24 hours to make a game, so it’s a huge constraint, but having such a constraint [inspires] you to find very interesting solutions.” *Dead Cells*, he adds, owes much of its vibrant visual design to the small number of people working on it. “It’s completely based on the size of our team, and the fact that we had to find ways to optimise for that.”

MotionTwin could never make an open-world game in the current sense, Bénard admits, but like McKellan, he argues that the developers of such

games are too beholden to scale for its own sake. “I talked a lot to somebody who worked on the last *Assassin’s Creed*, and we were discussing the idea of the horizon. The horizon is there for the single purpose of making you think there’s something there. Making an open world, I think, is about making the player feel that potential. And maybe you don’t have to actually make every single asset, every single house – you just have to make people feel like they could go there.” Grandeur need not be a question of literal exhaustiveness, in other words, nor does it have to require exhausting drudgery on the creator’s part. “I think when you have a huge team like Ubisoft – it’s the same for any larger company – when you have the ability to create everything in the world, maybe it’s all just crap at some point.”

Unionisation, in short, is about more than unions themselves and individual disagreements with management. It reflects a mounting need and desire for a holistic overhaul of the art and business of game development; a sea change not only in terms of how games are made but how they are played and understood. In this regard, all parties in the equation have a certain responsibility to one another. Publishers must cease treating their workers like cannon fodder, to be exchanged for fresh recruits after a few years of toil in the name of an unreasonable release schedule. Developers must resist the mythologisation of crunch by those further up the ladder, and be both aware of and prepared to stand up for their basic rights as human beings. And players and journalists must learn to think differently about games, letting go of the view that scale and round-the-clock updates are fundamental metrics of relevance or quality.

Unionisation would catalyse these shifts, by resetting the balance of power between managers and workers to create a basis for negotiation. If the complexities of union work are hard to sum up, Kate Edwards perhaps puts it best when she says that labour organisation isn’t about obstruction, but the opportunity for dialogue. “Nobody wants to strike, nobody wants labour action, nobody wants to stop working because we love what we do. But we want to make sure that if we have these problems, there’s some way of communicating with management. We need to sit down and talk about this, and you need to listen to us. Because we’re the people doing the work.” ■

Publishers must cease treating their workers like cannon fodder. Developers must resist the mythologisation of crunch by those further up the ladder



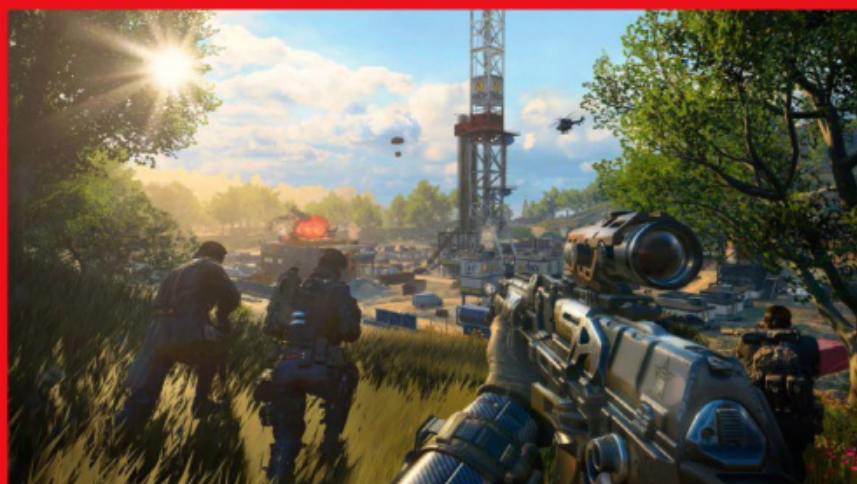
Sébastien Bénard of *Dead Cells* developer Motion Twin

Disciplinary proceedings

Establishing solidarity across pay grades and departments is a challenge for any union – a QA engineer on £20,000 or less might find collective action more attractive than, for instance, a team lead on a six-figure salary. For all that, Game Workers Unite UK's membership covers a surprising range. "We actually have a really good mix of disciplines in our membership," comments Declan Peach. "I couldn't say if there are any that are more numerous than others. We get a lot of QA people, but we also get a lot of senior people who've been in the industry for many years, and have always wanted to be in a union. We get support from all sectors, to be honest, everyone from marketing through art to QA to design and programming. It's an interesting one, because I've not really thought about it, but it's not been a challenge for us at all." The organisation has even had to adjust its membership rates to account for the "very wide range of salaries" in play.



TOP Motion Twin has experimented with expanding its workforce, but the worker cooperative model is hard to scale up.
MAIN The issues around *Anthem's* development have been exhaustively covered, but the overwork issues experienced at BioWare and the like occur within successful projects too.
RIGHT Activision fuelled calls for unionisation in December when it streamlined its operations to the tune of 800 layoffs. It earned record revenue in 2018, but still fell short of expectations



T H E M A K I N G O F ...



S L A Y T H E S P I R E

How a lifetime playing card games and a broadcast mentality created an indie smash hit

BY ALEX SPENCER

Format PC
Developer Mega Crit Games
Publisher Humble Bundle
Origin US
Release 2017

Graphical capabilities may have soared over the years, the scope of what games can represent opening up ever further, yet it's increasingly common to find ourselves back at a virtually recreated tabletop, shuffling digital simulacra of cards, in titles such as *Gwent*, *Artifact* and, of course, *Hearthstone*. But none of these games were in **Anthony Giovannetti's** head when he first started thinking about his own digital card game, *Slay The Spire*. He was much more interested in their analogue predecessors.

"At a really young age, I got into Magic: The Gathering, and it became an increasingly large part of my life, just playing card games," Giovannetti tells us. "At some point, I jumped from Magic into Netrunner pretty deeply. I got really involved in the scene and created Stimhack, the largest Netrunner fan site at the time." He's since drifted away from both games, but his experiences – and occasional frustrations – with them fed directly into the creation of what would become *Slay The Spire*.

Nevertheless, Giovannetti says that, some early physical prototyping aside, he never seriously considered making *Slay The Spire* as anything other than a digital game. After all, he was a computer-science major, as was his co-founder and fellow lead developer **Casey Yano**. And half of the team – that is, Yano – didn't even play physical card games. As far as Yano is concerned, *Slay The Spire's* presentation – with cards, laid out in roughly the format established by Magic, moving from a deck to a hand to a discard pile – is just convenient shorthand. "There's a strong familiarity there, and it sets expectations," he says. "If we make cards fly around and borrow elements from existing physical games, this let players understand [the game] in a more intuitive way."

Physical or digital, collectible card games aren't the only lineage on which *Slay The Spire* draws. Early on, Giovannetti looked at the competition, and realised that "I just couldn't, especially as an indie, make a big multiplayer *Hearthstone* or Magic killer. That doesn't really work." Instead, he thought about the way he played those games himself, and tried to design a game that wouldn't have to compete directly. "I know from experience that usually, if you're a Magic player, you don't play every other card game," he says. "You get deep into Magic, and



All the essential information – from stat-boosting Relics to the number of cards in each deck – is constantly visible

that becomes your game of choice. It's really hard to have multiple of those 'lifestyle' games. But it seemed like you could have a singleplayer card game with a much lower time profile that could act as a complement instead."

To make something complementary rather than competitive, he turned to two other styles of game – one analogue, one digital – with which

"AS A GAME DESIGNER I WANT TO TRY TO DESIGN THE KIND OF GAMES THAT APPEAL TO PEOPLE LIKE ME"

he had spent a lot of time. Giovannetti was the manager of a small boardgame store at the time, and spent quiet hours fiddling with the stock, in particular deck-building games such as *Dominion* and *Ascension*, where you gradually assemble a custom deck as you play. He decided to fuse those mechanics with the randomise-and-repeat structure of Roguelikes such as *FTL*, reckoning that the combination would "give you the mechanical excuse to be playing with different cards every time you play".

It's a strand of connective tissue between two disparate gaming traditions that seems obvious in retrospect. And Giovannetti's main fixation as a player and designer sits similarly in the overlap between collectible card games and competitive 'living' games like MOBAs. "Balance is something I've always been really concerned about as a player. As a game designer, I want to try to design the kind of games that appeal to

people like me, and solve the problems I have with other games. One of the frustrations of a physical product is you can't modify it once it's out there. In Magic, they can't tweak the cards – if a card's too good, they can ban it, and that's it," he says. "Whereas in a digital game, you can. I like it when developers play to that strength, that their games are mutable products that can change and adapt and improve." This, essentially, is the philosophy that defined *Slay The Spire's* entire creation.

Early in the game's development, Giovannetti reached out to some friends from the Netrunner community – top-level competitive players who, as he puts it, "are really good at finding optimal strategies and breaking games". They tested the first iteration of the game and found the flaws in its design: the cards they'd always overlook when building their deck, the combinations so powerful they eliminated any sense of challenge. Their qualitative feedback was combined with "aggressive metrics-based design", thanks to a homemade analytics tool – built on the Heroku cloud platform – which recorded the details of every game the testers played. "It would gather that data and we would create charts and graphs of everything so I could see: players are picking this card this percentage of the time, here's what players are winning with, these are the enemies that are doing the most damage – every little thing that we thought we could track. And I use that to try to give some sense of objectivity to our balancing."

From there, Giovannetti and Yano would tweak the game and its cards based on what they were seeing, with playtesters receiving new builds on a daily basis. This set the pace for how *Slay The Spire* evolved when it launched on Steam Early Access. This was in November 2017, two-and-a-half years after the start of development. "It was a complete game – certainly farther along than most games are when they launch in early access," Giovannetti says. The core mechanics were firmly locked down, and players could complete a full three-act run as one of two characters.

This fully featured offering didn't help the game make a big splash at first. "Usually, how games launch... it's described as like a Stegosaurus tail. So you have a big spike in that initial two weeks, then it peters out and you'll have smaller spikes later. But for us, it wasn't like that all. We launched and it was basically

totally dead." On its first day, the game sold a couple of hundred copies. At the end of that all-important first fortnight, not much had changed. But we all know that's not where this story ends. So how did *Slay The Spire* manage to go from that inauspicious beginning to over a million sales by the time it left Early Access in January 2019?

In a single word: streamers. After a few weeks, the game was picked up by a popular Chinese player, leading to a huge explosion in players – initially, the majority of *Slay The Spire*'s userbase was in China – and a growing presence on streams the world over. According to Giovannetti, this wasn't entirely a happy accident. He and Yano, aware of their no-name indie status and with no marketing budget to speak of, had spotted an opportunity to target the existing *Hearthstone* community, where they could be confident viewers would be interested in a digital card game, especially one that had been designed as a complement to their main hobby.

"We had kind of designed the game to appeal to streamers," he says. "We did a lot of little things with our UI and UX to make it very streamer-friendly. We try to display all of the information on the screen that's relevant, so that people just coming in can, at a glance, tell what's going on. We wanted to not hide too much behind rows and rows of screens – it's the easiest thing to do in a game like ours. So you can always see all the Relics up at the top and figure out what the player has going on at the time."

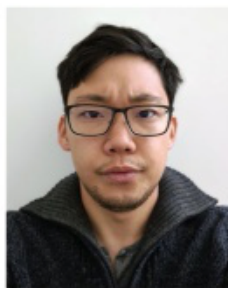
"And because of the nature of our game, it's very easy to see when a streamer screws something up. You can see them make a misplay, and you think, 'Oh, I can do better than that.' And you want to go try it yourself."

As the game's player count exploded, Mega Crit stuck with the processes it had used for those initial playtesters – using its analytics-led approach to design and redesign cards. "You're getting orders of magnitude more data, so outliers are going to have much less of an effect, just naturally," Giovannetti says. "But also, one of the nice properties is you get a lot of data from less skilled and less familiar players. It was really interesting comparing the win rates on our internal playtesters versus the public at large. It was a huge difference."

This didn't have much impact on what they were measuring, though; the numbers just got much bigger. Where things really changed was

Q&A

Casey Yano
Lead designer



You were primarily responsible for *Slay The Spire*'s art direction – what was your goal?

The characters and enemies needed strong readability, colour identity, unique silhouettes, and we wanted them to be easy for people to describe to each other. In a way, art needed to be conceptualised with design intent behind it. There's an architectural principle, 'form follows function' – and the function of our enemies is to be recognisable, so that it's easier for players to discuss strategy outside of the game in forums.

The setting could end up as generic fantasy – how did you put your own spin on it?

A lot of Anthony's initial concepts for classes and art were generic Western tropes but this was for the intent of design readability. Warriors are all about high HP, armour, strength. Rogues are swift and utilise poisons, yada yada yada. Leveraging existing tropes helps teach game mechanics faster and *Slay The Spire* already has so much complexity. Maintaining the feeling of a warrior or rogue without explicitly designing a knight in shining armour was real fun.

Were there any other influences on the style?

During the production of the game, I visited Thailand and there were so many interesting items and traditions there that I wanted to get some into the game. There's a large amount of Buddhist items such as the Vajra, Tingsha and Singing Bowl. It's a bit of an analogy to the Christian religious items found in the *Binding Of Isaac*, though there's no real overarching religious theme in *Slay The Spire*. Additionally, there's definitely an underlying Asian influence due to my upbringing as a Japanese-American.

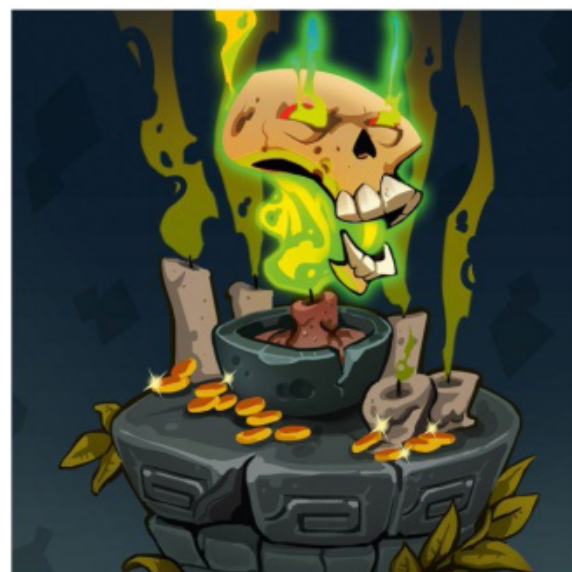
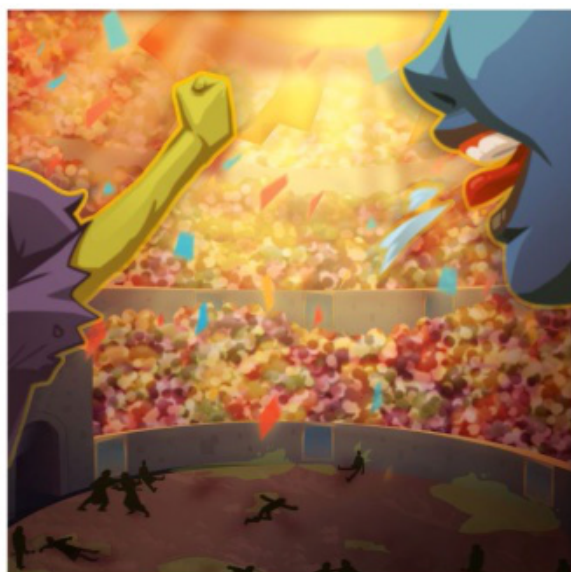
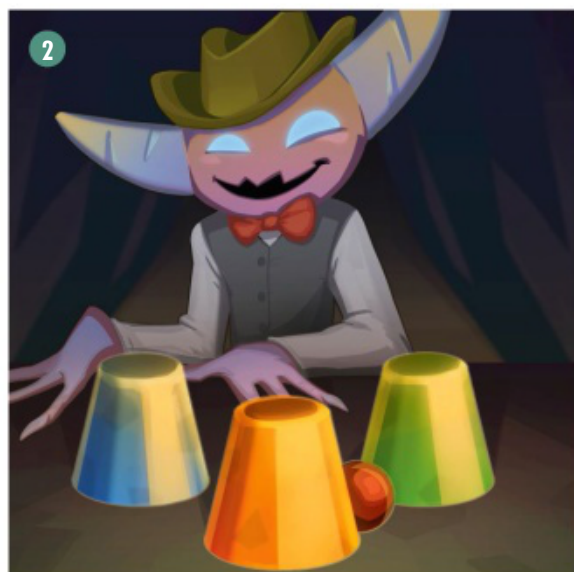
on the qualitative side. Giovannetti and Yano now had a wealth of discussions, on Steam and the game's subreddit, to pick through every day – as well as those all-important streamers. "While I'm coding, I'll just have another monitor up where I'll be watching a streamer just play the game," Giovannetti says. "You can see Twitch chat replying to things, hear the streamer saying their thoughts out loud, and you can use that, combined with the metrics, to get a good holistic view of how people are feeling about the game."

Of course, as anyone who has ever been on the Internet will know, not every piece of online feedback is helpful or informed. "Part of being a

good designer is being able to sift through the noise and find the signal. And that's where the metrics can help a lot, because we can see things like, 'Okay, if people are complaining about a card, is that backed up by the data or not? And if it's not, why could they be complaining about it?'" This was Mega Crit's guiding light throughout Early Access, as new cards, enemies, items and modes were added to the game and the balance of existing elements was tweaked, on a weekly and sometimes even daily basis. The biggest addition came in the form of a third character, the Defect, introduced in April 2018. "Our main goal was to create something that felt very different and really explored some new design space. We wanted to surprise people," he says. "So we tested a bunch of different weird ideas. Originally it was going to be more like a gunner character that loaded ammo and then fired it off, but it was a little too wonky, so we scrapped that."

Eventually the pair landed on the Defect's unique mechanic: orbs which can be slotted into a queue, persisting between turns and firing off passive effects, until they're 'evoked' for a one-time boost and discarded. Once again, they designed a set of cards, passed them to the internal playtesters – those high-level players from the Netrunner days – then put it out on the game's beta branch. Keeping, of course, an eye on the analytics every step of the way. "It was such a different process than designing the other two characters – things just went fast," Giovannetti says. "We moved at a breakneck pace with it. But it was a lot of fun, because we had no issue just drastically changing things one day to the next. We would test out cards for a day or two, and then modify or rework them or remove the card entirely the next day."

This pace of updates was a boon for streamers, because it provided them with a constant churn of fresh updates to explore, but it meant a lot of work for Giovannetti and Yano. Work that has slowed but not stopped since *Slay The Spire* passed v1.0 and left Early Access. It's still very much a living game, with tweaks and updates rolling in – there's even a fourth character on the way – but at a more sustainable pace. "We're still doing updates, just not on the weekly schedule any more," Giovannetti says. "It was super-good for the game, great for the community, but man was it vicious on us. And so now we're happy to take a step back, slow down, and get some breathing room." ■



1 Yano wanted enemy designs to be easily communicable by players. "Nobody wants to be forced to describe a monster as 'the larger knight with the red axe', when you can have more fun describing them as donuts or time slugs."

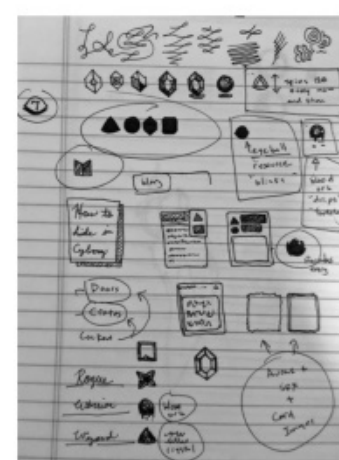
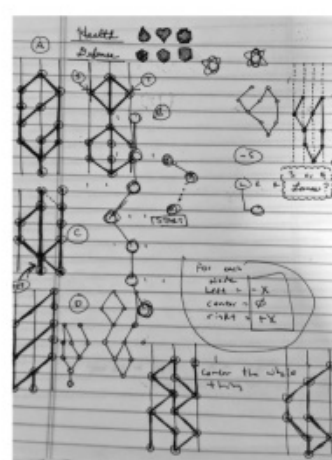
2 The journey up the Spire is punctuated by choose-your-own-adventure-style narrative events. The chief inspiration was *FTL*, with one vital difference – the outcomes are put front and centre so players can make an informed decision.

3 When cards were being beta tested, Yano created rough placeholder art for them. The testing community got so attached to it that the final game includes an option to switch to beta art.

4 Cards are colour-coded to their character, tying into "ingrained notions" that "warriors are red, rogues are green, and wizards are blue," Yano says.

5 The robotic Defect was the third – but not final – character to be added.

6 "The graveyard of ideas is larger than the things currently in the game," Giovannetti says. "A big part of design is being able to cut. It's hard, but it's vital"



STUDIO PROFILE

SIE LONDON STUDIO

The Sony game makers striving
to make innovation part
of the furniture

By JEN SIMPKINS



Sony's largest internal development studio is also perhaps its most experimental. It might sound like a counterintuitive approach for the PlayStation giant to encourage, but it's done good business: SIE London Studio is responsible for mainstream hits such as the *EyeToy* and *SingStar* series, as well as the Wonderbook augmented-reality peripheral and VR sampling menu *PlayStation VR Worlds*. Its creative endeavours in software have always been intertwined with Sony's hardware. Now at the forefront of SIE London Studio's future plans, PlayStation VR is a fine project for a team that has always produced magic from unexpected places.

Indeed, the beginnings of the studio would set the tone. Originally Team Soho, it began to accumulate new talent in 2000, most of the recruits university graduates with little to no experience. **Tara Saunders**, today the studio's head of operations, was one of them. She had her sights set on becoming an animator, and had already interviewed at the BBC earlier the same day she first visited London Studio. "But when I saw the technology involved in game-making, how it really brought the art and tech worlds together, that was the thing that really inspired me." As an animator on ambitious *GTAAIII* homage *The Getaway*, she was soon dashing around London with her team members, taking photos of its buildings in order to recreate the city in-game. "There were a lot of people that didn't have preconceptions about what making a game was like," she says. "Having people that can think fresh things, and not just do what everybody else has done, means that there's a lot of technical and creative challenges and you need people whose minds are open to that. Like, 'Okay, the rulebook isn't set, how do we write it?'"

It was a time of change for Sony: Studio Camden and Team Soho merged in 2002 (the company had done the sums on running two small operations just around the corner from each other in pricey districts) to form London Studio. PS2's popularity, meanwhile, meant that the dev scene exploded: new studios headhunted talent from diverse creative industries, which resulted in countless unique and experimental games. "I think every project that we've done since has had something new about it," Saunders says. Thanks in part to the security and trust afforded by the Sony mothership, not only was London Studio pioneering new mocap technologies and processes, it was also getting used to approaching challenges in a more abstract way – say, when presented with a bizarre new digital



Saunders describes the studio as "warm, and very family-orientated. We come into work and have a laugh together"

camera device and asked to create a game for it. "That's definitely been the heritage of the studio," she says, pointing to the original brainstorming sheets for *EyeToy: Play* on display in a nearby cabinet. One of them bears a hastily scribbled thought: 'Imagine that the human is the controller'.

And the development relationship worked the other way too. "The *SingStar* microphones came from the team coming up with, 'What do we do with audio inputs?'" Saunders says. "Once

"THERE'S A LOT OF TECHNICAL AND CREATIVE CHALLENGES AND YOU NEED PEOPLE WHOSE MINDS ARE OPEN"

you've got audio input going into the PC, it's like, 'Okay, so we're going to do a singing game – to really feel like a pop star, you need to hold the microphone'. And so that was led almost the other way around." (Later still, when PSVR was in development as Project Morpheus, London Studio's team would be regularly feeding back to Morpheus' hardware team, inputting into the headset's design and functionality.)

It was during her work on *EyePet* that Saunders began to see how she could best drive the studio forward. As the art manager, she collaborated closely with the core creative portion of the team while managing the people side of things, and increasingly found herself taking on more team organisation and development projects as a sideline to her day job. It was clear that the hugely important people-focused side of studio life was being underserved. "And then the other big kickstarter was actually the refit, which was a few years ago now," she tells us. Our visit aptly demonstrates the ambience that Saunders has worked hard to cultivate. The marketing-



Founded 1993

Employees 92

Key staff Tara Saunders (head of studio operations), Stuart Whyte (director of VR product development), Liz Wyle (executive producer)

URL www.worldwidestudios.net/london

Selected softography *The Getaway*, *EyeToy*, *SingStar*, *Wonderbook*, *PlayStation VR Worlds*

Current projects *Blood & Truth*

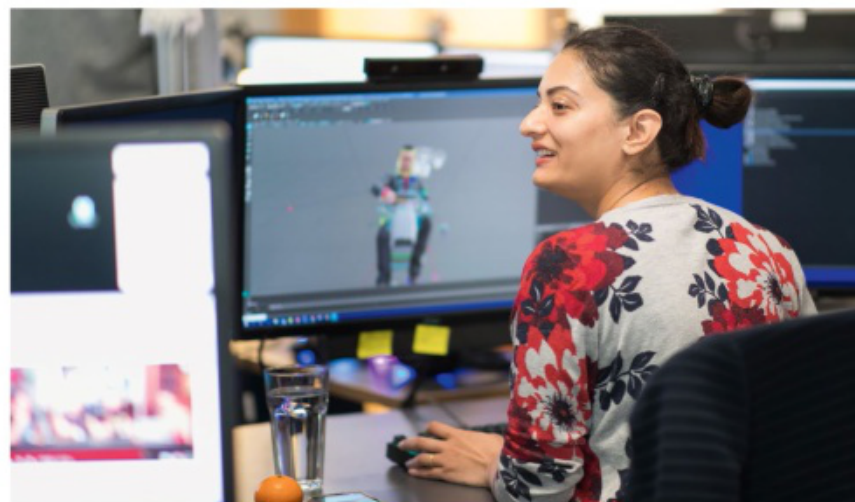
focused side of the building is abuzz with Sony employees and visitors, casual but undeniably glam, the colourful bar stools and neon signage of its lobby/canteen area giving the impression of a grown-up student union.

But out of the revolving doors into the city, and a short walk down the street, the development building couldn't feel more different. It's quieter, with ragtag souvenirs from the development of cult hit games propped up in cabinets by desks. A small kitchen leads into a lounge-like space with low-slung sofas. It feels more like a home than an office. But it wasn't always this way. "It came from interviewing people," Saunders says,

"Them coming into the building, and me going, 'Oh, we've got some work to do' – apologising is the wrong word, but feeling like the building wasn't reflective of who we wanted to be." That was the catalyst that led Saunders to pitch her current job to Sony's then-head of Europe, Michael Denny. "I said, 'I'd like to do this moving forward. I want to head up the studio ops team, have a management team of three people, and I'll look after the bits that fall in between – the people, environment and culture for the studio.'"

"I think London Studio historically has been quite buried within the corporate mothership of PlayStation," she continues. "It's easy to get lost unless you have your own identity and culture. I looked at Media Molecule, Guerrilla, Naughty Dog, and I thought, 'We're not doing as much as they are'. I saw the team setups that they had, and I said, 'This is what we need to be the most successful studio we can be'." With Liz Wyle as executive producer on one side, and head of VR product development **Stuart Whyte** on the

STUDIO PROFILE



"I think of London Studio almost as a boutique studio," Whyte says. Around 80 per cent of assets are outsourced. "That's something I'm passionate about – having a strong core team, and working with other parts of the industry to scale without really having to scale"

other, London Studio has a management structure that means Saunders can focus on ensuring the studio culture reflects its goals: of championing weird and wonderful hardware, and working out how it might fit into people's lives and homes.

Wonderbook was one such memorable attempt, using augmented reality markers in a book-like peripheral to tell stories on-screen via PS3 and PlayStation Eye Camera. Saunders recalls setting it up for a meeting with Sony Pictures in a hotel room in LA, and calling a maintenance person to the room to get the television input to work. "The book was there on the table in front of the camera. And suddenly on the TV screen, this thing popped out of the book. And the hardware guy went 'Oh my god, what was that?' We closed it down, like, 'Nothing to see here!'" she laughs. "And it was such a moment. Doing something magical out of unexpected things – it's always been that for us."

VR is presently the big focus. In-game metrics from *PlayStation VR Worlds*, released in 2016, showed how long players tended to stay in the headset, and which of its many playstyles they'd repeatedly return to. Gangster action sim *The London Heist* was by far the most played. *Blood & Truth* is its spiritual successor, an attempt to create a true triple-A virtual-reality game and system seller – and push the studio to the next level. "London Studio has got a rich history of some amazing games," Whyte tells us. "But actually, there haven't been any triple-A-type experiences since *The Getaway*. And I know that Michael and the leadership team were keen to kind of reinvent the studio, because of the success of *VR Worlds*, because of the potential the medium was showing, as to basically not do the smaller titles any more." Whyte's background working on games such as *Fable* made him a natural fit for this new era of London Studio: after

Lionhead shuttered in 2016, his efforts to start his own Guildford-based studio brought him into Sony's path, and the rest is history.

"One of the challenges that we have is that if you look at our sister studios, boy, that's some competition," he laughs. "Putting microphones or augmented reality, or cameras in the mix, you get to do stuff that is super-creative and innovative. But there was definitely a desire from the studio to do something big, and feel that we could stand at least a little bit more shoulder-to-shoulder with our sister studios." London Studio is wedded to VR now, and its future plans generally revolve around the headset (although it's also exploring live-action technologies in games, offering support to *Erica*

keep playing on that roulette table, somebody else is going to come along and win big."

Sony's set to keep investing in VR, then, and London Studio is a natural fit to lead exploration into the new medium. It's achieved remarkable things with *Blood & Truth*, including a 3D audio mechanic that adjusts the orchestra-to-grime ratio of the soundtrack according to how well you're playing, and a recreation of the London skyline that stitches together drone photos, UK government data and even photos taken for *The Getaway*. "It's amazing being in the heart of London in that regard," Whyte says. "And obviously London's a real cultural melting pot, too: about a third of our studio are European nationals, so we've got a

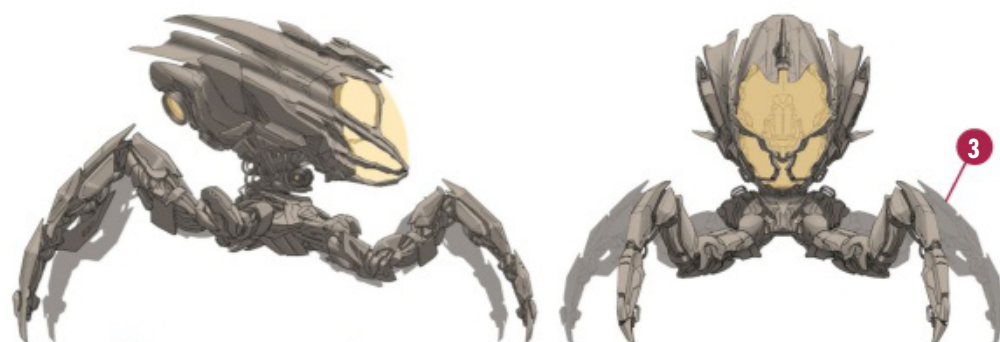
"PUTTING MICROPHONES OR AUGMENTED REALITY, OR CAMERAS IN THE MIX, YOU GET TO DO SUPER-CREATIVE STUFF"

maker Flavourworks). What happens to London Studio should the VR bubble burst? "A few months ago, I went out for dinner with Shuhei Yoshida and Shawn Layden," Whyte says. "And Shawn was talking about how, historically, Sony would place bets on things – I'm not going to name those things because I don't want to be specific."

"It's like, you've got £1,000 in your pocket. You walk up to a roulette table, you put the money on the table, you win or you lose. You lose, you're like, 'That isn't going to work', and walk away. In the past there have definitely been times where we've experimented with something that hasn't worked, so we shut it down. But from the very top of the organisation, there is something of, like, 'There's something here with VR'. All hardware has limitations – but there is something here that, if we don't keep investing,

real mix within the studio." He laughs. "And when I worked at Lionhead, we were on the Surrey Research Park in Guildford – we had like three or four delivery options, and they were all shitty pizza and Chinese places. My first day at London Studio loading up Deliveroo, there were literally 400 delivery options on burgers *alone*."

And while the commute and cost of living takes some of the shine off the convenience of having everything on your doorstep, working in one of London's most vibrant creative districts is still a daily inspiration. "I commute in when the sun is rising," Saunders says. "You've got this history and architecture all around you... You could be going to a factory and canning beans all day, or that kind of thing. But we're making entertainment for people's homes, in an amazing location. What's not to enjoy about that?" ■



- 1 The studio's taste for innovation (see *EyePet*) means it often builds custom engines.
- 2 *The London Heist*'s popularity paved the way for the studio's future in VR.
- 3 Saunders on *VR Worlds*: "It was a foundation project: we were still finding out ourselves what worked."
- 4 Wonderbook's engine was stripped apart and rebuilt to make London Studio's new VR tech.
- 5 In *Blood & Truth*, the team focused on a variety of locomotive options.
- 6 Peter Lumby's character concepts for *VR Luge*

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Super Mario Maker Wii U

One of the **Edge** brood is so enraptured by the *Mario Maker 2* Direct broadcast that he watches it five times in quick succession. Naturally, we soon hook up the Wii U. He's still in the formative stages of level design – by which we mean the screen was once so full of Bowsers he hit the memory limit – but hey, he's got plenty of years ahead of him.

Arms Switch

We're back in training ahead of the grand final of Nintendo's Party Crash Bash, the tournament that will determine the number one *Arms* character. After a semi-final defeat for *Mechanica*, our usual main, we're throwing our full support behind the noodle-armed Min-Min. Otherwise, *Ninjara* – who, two years on, is still just the worst – is going to be crowned champion. We're not letting that happen without a fight.

The Swords Of Ditto Switch

The *Mormo's Curse* update, arriving with the Switch release, removes permadeath from all areas apart from the final climb at *Mormo's Palace*: when you die out in the world, you're now teleported back to your house minus some cash, instead of being thrust forward 100 years into the future as a new hero. It's more forgiving, and so the vibrant cartoon world is easier to enjoy – its *Zelda*-lite dungeoneering and goofy toy-led combat might be simplistic, but it's perfectly uncomplicated holiday-game material.

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Explore the iPad
edition of **Edge** for
extra Play content

Market forces

Advertising is all about implying value. If some hot new game is splashed across the side of a double-decker bus, or teased on the big screen on a Hollywood blockbuster's opening night, surely it must be something special? The reality, of course, is often anything but. A big marketing drive can be born of confidence, sure. Yet it can equally be done out of desperation.

There's a hint of the former in how Sega is supporting *Judgment* (p102), though our happiness at seeing the publisher finally supporting a RGG Studio game is tempered somewhat by all those years it neglected the *Yakuza* series. This spin-off, a tale of a private detective set in the same fictional corner of Tokyo as its forebear, comes not only with the usual subtitled Japanese audio, but an English-language voice track too. The only previous RGG game to offer the same was the first *Yakuza*, back when Sega thought it had the Japanese *GTA* on its hands.

As *Yakuza* fans will know only too well, there's little more frustrating than seeing a publisher hold back on promoting something that clearly deserves it. When we first saw *Blood & Truth* (p118) at Paris Games Week in 2017, we knew SIE London was onto something. Yet we've barely heard of nor seen the game since. An 11th hour promo blitz is deserved, but awareness is a long game, or should be.

Still, you can't lay all of this at the marketing departments' door. We've been struck by the online conversation around *Outer Wilds* (p116), a beguiling adventure about the never-ending end of the world by which critics, commentators and consumers alike seem to have been taken by surprise, as if it emerged from the ether, fully formed. Perhaps those people should pay more attention – we first brought you word of it all the way back in 2015. And they say that print media can no longer keep up.



Judgment

Kazuma Kiryu is nowhere in sight, and Kamurocho is horny as hell. Robbed of its moral compass — the Yakuza hero who kept the place in something resembling order, a rare good heart in a bad, bad world — the denizens of this semi-fictional Tokyo red-light district have clearly felt a stirring in their collective loins, and boy are they indulging it. Wandering NPCs chatter excitedly about blowing their salaries, and presumably various other things, in one of the local soaplands. Just about everyone appears to be on their way to a host or hostess club. And there's a gang of perverts — drone-using panty-sniffers, public ass-grabbers et al — on the loose. This element has always been present in the *Yakuza* games: heck, even Kiryu wasn't above availing himself of (and relieving himself to) all Kamurocho has to offer. But rarely has it felt quite so widespread, so outspoken, or so urgent.

Kiryu's replacement as protagonist is no ass-grabber, mind. Like his predecessor, Takayuki Yagami is a calming emotional presence, an ice-cold exterior and fists and feet of steel masking a warm heart. On first inspection, though, he's very different. Gone are Kiryu's sharp suits and bold shirts. Our new hero has boyband hair and wears a leather jacket, white trainers and jeans so skinny he keeps his phone in his back pocket. His motivations are different, too: rather than trying to save his loved ones or prevent Kamurocho's mob underworld from tearing itself apart, he's a private dick out to solve a murder case. Yet as the hours roll by, the story becomes RGG Studio's stock-in-trade of twists, turns, and double- and triple-crosses; Yagami reveals himself to be another brawler with a cherub's heart; and what started out feeling a spin-off instead feels instead more like a reskin.

Not that there's anything wrong with that, admittedly. In any case, while this is hardly a reinvention of the *Yakuza* template, *Judgment* at least does a few things differently to better portray the life of a private detective. Some, predictably, work better than others. Selecting dialogue options in such a way as to efficiently gather the information you need nets you a chunk of bonus XP. You investigate scenes in firstperson, controller vibration alerting you to nearby objects of interest, or via a drone Yagami controls with his phone. You pick locks. You chase things down; sometimes a perp, sometimes a lost kid, or a wig caught on the breeze. You tail people, ducking quickly into cover when they pause and check over their shoulders (which they do *constantly*). Some of the sidequests are repurposed as cases — a wife who suspects her husband is cheating on her; a young man desperately seeking the return of a beloved jacket — and net you a chunk of much-needed cash.

Money's tight early on: a ¥50,000 windfall for having save data from another RGG Studio game helps,

Developer RGG Studio
Publisher Sega
Format PS4
Release Out now

While this is hardly a reinvention of the *Yakuza* template, it at least does a few things differently

but the money doesn't last too long. And it's in this early skintness that the developer most effectively distances *Judgment* from the *Yakuza* games. Yagami literally lives at the office, kipping on a small leather sofa. It's a tiny space — he can only reach his desk by sidling awkwardly between the couch and the wall — and were it not for his landlady's kindness, he'd have been out on his ear long ago.

It's not his lowest ebb, but it's not far off. Three years earlier, as a young lawyer with a suit Kiryu would approve of and slicked-back hair, he got an accused murderer off the hook. This is rare indeed in Japan, where acquittal rates are absurdly low, largely because only dead-cert cases ever make it to trial. A career as a superstar lawyer beckoned — but, weeks later, his former client was arrested again, after apparently murdering his girlfriend and burning down their apartment. That ended Yagami's career as a lawyer, but three years on, his hairdo finally liberated from its Brylcreem prison, he's doing much the same work. He's still on good terms with his former employer, Genda, who throws him small cases and odd jobs. And, when a Kansai yakuza turns up dead in an alley, his eyes gouged out of their sockets — the third case of its kind — and a Tojo Clan captain gets pinched for it, Genda turns to Yagami for help. This is going to need more than just a lawyer.

If that makes *Judgment* sound like a game in which you spend a lot of time punching things then yes, well done, though in fairness you must also kick them. Yagami's a self-taught martial artist and fights with a good deal more flair than Kiryu's raw power. What he calls his "Kamurocho style" kung fu involves two stances, switchable by D-pad; Crane is full of sweeping, wide-ranging attacks that are better for crowd control, while Tiger is more directional and focused, making it better for solo opponents. It's standard RGG Studio fare — the heavy-attack finisher changing depending on the number of inputs in your light-attack string — but there are a few additions to the formula. Sprint directly at a wall, for instance, and Yagami springs off it to attack an enemy with an aerial flourish.

It's not something we find ourselves using much in the general run of play, but the wall spring has an essential extra function: it's a guaranteed way of avoiding what the game calls Mortal Wounds. When a powerful enemy enters their rage state — surrounding themselves in a swirl of coloured particles late in a fight, an RGG Studio signal that things are about to get tough — their most powerful attacks will cause permanent damage that can't be healed by eating or using restoratives. They can only be patched up with a costly single-use medkit, or by visiting a friendly doctor. Given that certain enemies can knock off half





ABOVE Photo missions may start with another dreary tailing section, but there's a certain thrill to lining up the perfect shot of a cheating couple, ensuring you've got the right angle to capture all the incriminating info



TOP You wouldn't see Kiryu doing that, would you. Yagami's certainly a more athletic sort, as the wall-run attacks and frequent chase sequences make perfectly clear.
MAIN A mysterious prankster calls Yagami up from time to time to say he's hidden a bomb somewhere in Kamurocho. They test the *Yakuza* fan's knowledge of the district, but newcomers will be given the solution before the clock runs out.
LEFT Combat is spiced up by a raft of context-sensitive finishers, known here as EX moves. We didn't think we'd ever use this one, and only unlocked it because it was cheap. We're delighted we did



your health bar with a Mortal combo, it's a fundamental change to the *Yakuza* games' combat rhythm.

Still, the odds are firmly tipped in your favour. Yagami has his own rage state, dubbed EX Boost, which turns Mortal damage into the regular kind while also negating stagger from incoming blows, buffing your movement speed, and letting you cancel out of almost any attack and switch styles mid-combo. New skills are acquired using the XP that you gain from doing just about anything Kamurocho has to offer: completing missions or side cases, eating at restaurants, even clearing levels in the arcade. And from time to time you'll be given a helping hand. Sometimes it's from Kaito, a former yakuza who still dresses the part and is now Yagami's right-hand man. More often it's from a local you've befriended; the restaurant owner lobbing a piping hot skewer for you to force in some poor mook's mouth, or a bottle of hot sauce for the eyes.

These handy accomplices are another twist to the *Yakuza* template. While side stories can still be found through map icons or simply wandering the streets, Yagami's Kamurocho is littered with opportunities for friendship. Most are working in the local eateries, conversation sparking up when you order or buy something from them. You'll help an immigrant who finds the pace of Tokyo life overwhelming, and a fast-food restaurant reverse a slide in sales. You'll aid a ramen-shop owner in his bid to court the Instagram generation. Check in on someone a few times and you'll fill a progress bar, not only unlocking those helpful combat finishers, but also raising Yagami's standing in Kamurocho as a whole. New cases appear on job boards, new side stories pop up on the map, and all the while a



VIRTUAL INSANITY

As in *Yakuza*, your local Club Sega offers a host of coin-op classics. Over in the newly opened Paradise VR centre, however, is an extravagantly neon-flecked AR boardgame, rather prosaically named Dice & Cube. You're given a limited number of rolls to reach the end, though certain spaces give you an option to win a few more by, say, duffing up some virtual ne'er-do-wells. It's fairly mindless stuff, but certainly looks the part – and is surprisingly lucrative, which presumably explains why it's walled off during the opening hours of the game when Yagami's flat broke. If that doesn't appeal, perhaps a spot of drone racing will? No, nor to us, but the option's there regardless, your craft upgradeable using parts that litter Kamurocho's streets.

While it takes a good while to get into gear, this is eventually a story to rival the *Yakuza* games in terms of the number of bad actors with their fingers in the pie. As is often the case, Tokyo real estate is at the heart of it

picture emerges of Yagami as, like Kiryu before him, a good guy whose only real crime was making the occasional bad decision.

Yet he never really progresses beyond that. This is to be expected, of course – no new protagonist is ever going to rival someone with half-a-dozen games' worth of emotional and narrative baggage. While you'll get caught up in the central plot, Yagami only ever feels like a vehicle for it, rather than its driving force, as Kiryu always was. He may burn with the same injustice, and put his body on the line for those he serves, but it lacks impact, as it was always likely to do. RGG Studio forces a few detours from the main story to flesh out the characters, but this only serves to rob the central narrative of its momentum. A saggy second act has us wondering if we feel like seeing it through to the end – something we'd never say when Kiryu was in earshot.

That this is all to be expected from what is, if we're honest, a *Yakuza* game by another name is no great surprise. Yet it is still a little deflating. While some detective work is engaging, too much of it is throwaway, repetitive and, worse, overused. Tailing missions are the worst offender, simplistic, overlong, tightly scripted and seemingly everywhere. In its cutscenes, its combat and its tales of the lives of struggling, troubled, randy everyday people – in all the things that make it a *Yakuza* game, in other words – *Judgment* excels. In the things that seek to make it stand apart, it disappoints. Whether this is a one-off experiment, or simply the first of many, remains to be seen; if it's to be the latter, much remains to be done.

Post Script

Sega has spent years building a city around Kiryu. What happens when someone else moves in?

We have said many times in these pages that Kamurocho is the real star of the *Yakuza* series. That while Kiryu may be its protagonist, and trail around with him several TV box sets' worth of history, it is in the corner of Tokyo he calls home that *Yakuza*'s real soul is found. Over the past 13 years, Kamurocho has been the central backdrop for seven mainline games, a handful of spin-offs, and now *Judgment*. Where other, similar series let their itchy feet take them to a different land in every new instalment, *Yakuza* has always been rooted in Kamurocho, a red-light district that never gets any bigger, just denser, richer and more beloved. It, as much as if not more than Kiryu, is the reason we keep coming back. Or so we thought. *Judgment* is the first game to truly put that theory to the test.

Takayuki Yagami's first game has its problems, but its host city certainly isn't one of them. It benefits from the new visual sheen afforded by the Dragon Engine, the dramatically improved RGG Studio tech first introduced in *Yakuza 6* (and subsequently used to power the *Kiwami* remakes of the first two games in the series). Now even more buildings can be accessed, many with different businesses based on each floor; Yagami can even get into a few of their break rooms, chatting up staff for gossip that might help him crack a case. More rooftops are accessible, either by the stairs or a ladder in an alleyway, offering vantage spots for investigations using your drone. The hotel district, at the northern end of town, was under reconstruction during *Yakuza 6*; here it's been re-opened. And if it can't expand outwards, Kamurocho can still go down. An indoor koi-fishing pond turns out to be a front for a plush underground casino; elsewhere, a basement-level retro arcade is really a yakuza hangout.

These are small potatoes by typical open-world standards; imagine being in an Ubisoft pitch meeting and suggesting the same world as before with a few ladders and subterranean gambling. But they work in the context of Kamurocho, freshening up a city district whose streets we thought we knew inside out. And while Yagami's debut adventure may hit many of the same beats — and faces — as a Kazuma Kiryu joint, it's remarkable how different the place feels when you shuffle things round a bit. Kiryu's adventures typically begin on Tenkaichi Street, in Kamurocho's far southwest, where his second home, a first-floor bar called Serena, is found. Yagami's begins a block-and-a-half to the east: his office is next door to Club Sega, just behind the pawn shop Kiryu visits once or twice a game to offload the crockery and ornaments he's punched out of the local mobsters.

Yagami's first game has its problems, but its host city certainly isn't one of them



Similarly, Yagami's most frequent haunt is Genda Law, his former employer, nestled in the far northwest on West Shichifuku Street. Over the years we've used the manhole in the playpark to access the sewers and, beyond them, an illicit underground city. There was once a doctor there, too, who treated an ally's gunshot wound. But that's about it, and so trekking up here so regularly gives the game something approaching a sense of identity. And while it's a bit of a mission heading from Yagami's office in the southeast to a business in the opposite corner of the map — a trick the game pulls in a number of directions with suspicious frequency, as if 50 hours somehow weren't enough — the world has been somewhat designed to accommodate it. Yagami's favourite haunt, a bar called Tender, is his office local. Just past Genda Law, in the sewers, is the only doctor who can heal Mortal Wounds.

Judgment's repurposing of sidequest chains as friendships also changes the way you see, and navigate, the world. To Kiryu, Kamurocho's various restaurants, takeaways and cafés are mere healing fountains, used to top up his health after a fight (and, later, to chase the Trophy for eating and drinking everything the city has to offer at least once). Here, battered and bruised after just edging a battle gone wrong, our Yagami ignores the nearest eatery, because he's maxed out the friendship meter of its kindly server. So begins a nervous journey to the Wild Jackson two blocks away, with pixels of health remaining, because we want to find out if the owner's made any progress in his search for a business to collaborate with, and so arrest a fall in sales.

The world feels more modern now too, reflecting its more youthful new protagonist. While Kiryu shunned technology, Yagami embraces it, running precise social-media searches to gather vital info, flying his drone around outside office buildings, and taking endless video calls on his smartphone. Kamurocho, too, feels more technologically contemporary than before, with a giant HD screen beaming down from Taihei Boulevard, a city-wide loyalty scheme sending discount vouchers to your phone, and a cheerily daft VR arcade newly opened on the main square.

Inevitably, Kiryu casts a long shadow, and much of the game feels like wearing someone else's slippers; comfortable, yes, and satisfying, but only to a point. Series fans may find themselves pining for that worn-out old pair they were never entirely sure they wanted to say goodbye to. Newcomers — who Sega have courted with a level of enthusiasm we'd liked to have seen when it had a *Yakuza* game to promote — may leave wondering what all the fuss is about. Kamurocho has always been the star, and continues to be. But perhaps it needs that quiet, stoic ex-yakuza to bring the best out of it. ■

Observation

No Code's wildly ambitious follow-up to the eerie *Stories Untold* casts you as an AI that feels as flawed as a human. The game's elevator pitch is essentially *2001: A Space Odyssey*, but from the perspective of HAL – and while *Observation* doesn't quite match up to Stanley Kubrick's masterpiece, your role here is similarly, fascinatingly ambiguous. At various points during this gripping narrative adventure your actions will leave you feeling squirmingly uneasy. Are you really doing the right thing? Can it be justified by the fact that you're playing a computer? All the while, you have the shivering sense that at least one of Asimov's laws will be broken by the end credits.

It spins an absorbing sci-fi yarn that's been carefully constructed around a series of surprises that shouldn't be spoiled. Suffice it to say you're on a low-orbit space station, wherein medic Emma Fisher is going through her routines; as the ship's AI, SAM, you help out, interfacing with pressure modules, resetting hull contacts, running network diagnostics and the like. Suddenly there's an incident, and Emma and SAM end up, well, somewhere unexpected. Your goal is to pool resources, human effort combining with artificial intelligence to figure out what not on Earth is going on.

As such, it plays out as a kind of singleplayer co-op game, or an escort mission where your partner has a brain for once. On more than one occasion we're reminded of *Metroid*: through Emma, via interfacing with different systems, obtaining new protocols and combining data within his memory banks, SAM's abilities steadily improve. Soon, you're no longer limited to flicking between camera feeds – which can be zoomed and panned, letting you pair with laptops to download audio logs and documents – as you steer a floating sphere around the station.

SAM's faltering systems enforce this manual approach. The tactile quality of the various interfaces – the combination of old and new tech and the range of operating systems speaks to both the history and the multicultural contribution to the station – which variously require you to hold several buttons, twiddle analogue sticks and even engage in the odd QTE, make these otherwise straightforward tasks more involving. And, yes, they make SAM feel like more of a tangible presence – and given the themes in which *Observation*'s story trades, that's clearly no accident. The choices you're invited to make don't fundamentally change the narrative – this is a story with a single, canonical ending – but force you to consider your role within it, with some decisions bringing questions of trust and empathy into play. You can be a stickler for the rules, justifying your intransigence by your programming. Or, at times, you can be more playful, if sometimes to Emma's chagrin: she'll grow exasperated if you do the wrong thing, or if you're too slow to get to her.

Developer No Code
Publisher Devolver Digital
Format PC, PS4 (tested)
Release Out now

All the while,
you have the
shivering sense
that at least
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end credits



SPACE AND TIME

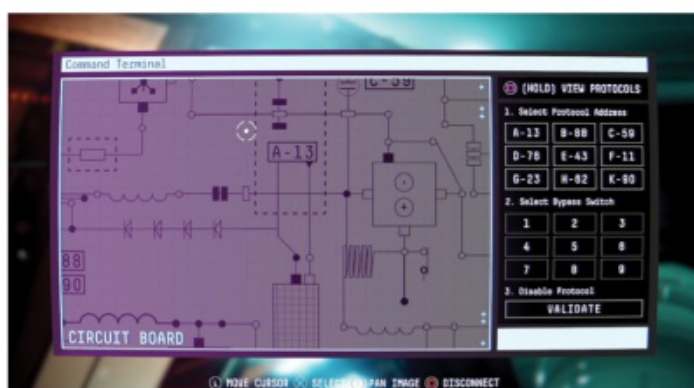
Observation is so absorbing you'll want to complete it in a single sitting, though if you start it in the evening you can expect to be playing into the wee small hours. And that's assuming you're not bothered about fully restoring SAM's memory banks, which should take you a few hours longer. An obvious point of no return presents the chance to mop up anything you've missed, and you're given the run of the place to do so. It also helps that you can do much of it from the static cameras, and that you're reminded from which laptops you've already pulled data. You might consider checking some of them earlier on, mind – a handful of plot developments are sneakily foreshadowed in audio logs.

Sometimes that might be because you're simply nosing around, since there's a wealth of detail to take in, whether you're bothered about fully reassembling SAM's memory banks or not. In one of countless clever touches, the image quality appears sharper inside the spheres, with the station's lo-res external cameras a remnant of the VHS age. Meanwhile, if you collide with any floating detritus – or even Emma herself when she's moving around – your feed will crackle and go fuzzy, taking a second to snap back to crystal clarity.

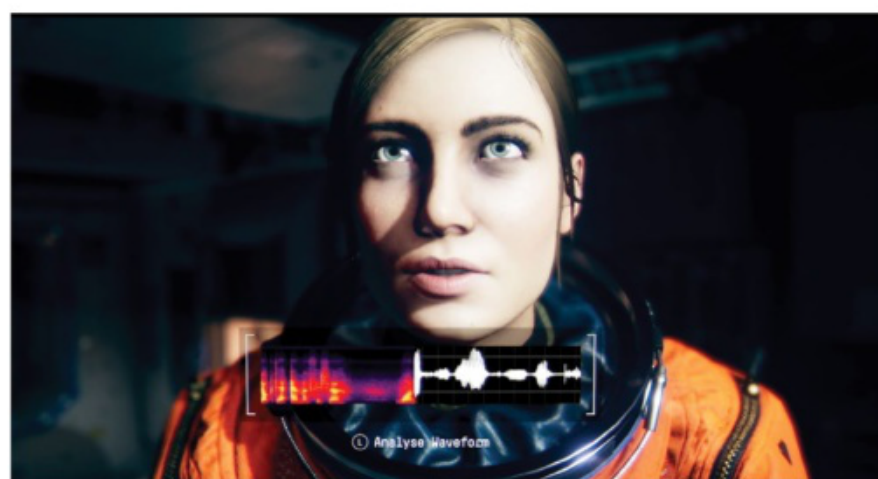
But the story can only progress when you're doing what you're told, and though there's a certain nerdy thrill that comes from interacting with a new piece of tech, there's more busywork than brainwork involved. For the most part, it feels like a necessary trade-off, with puzzles made relatively straightforward for the sake of narrative pacing: if a laptop requires a password, you'll find it on a Post-It nearby, while one particular method of communication amounts to an abstract twist on Simon Says, although the context makes it more compelling than it sounds. You won't get stuck, then, but you might just get lost. There's a waypoint system that's both easily missed and takes some getting used to – it'll zip off when you enter a new room or corridor, and not always in the direction you're supposedly headed. And while for the most part your objective is clear, once or twice you're left flying blind. At one point we're left listlessly milling between a handful of rooms, little realising that listening to an audio log had stopped us interfacing with a mission-critical hatch.

Otherwise, it sustains a strong pace, and a constant, fidgety tension. As Emma, Kezia Burrows is inspired casting, not just for the quality of her performance but because you naturally associate her with *Alien Isolation*'s Amanda Ripley. Spoiler alert: you're not being tailed by a xenomorph here, though it's apparent even from the early stages that you're not entirely alone. And No Code springs shocks in clever ways, borrowing a trick from found-footage horrors in the way blank camera feeds reveal surprises when they're fixed. It cranks up the pressure with the odd time-sensitive task, too; the threat of failure isn't always followed through, but Emma's cries to hurry up alongside ticking timers make for a convincing illusion. And it knows just when to snatch away control, locking you into a single feed or having Emma holding a sphere module so you don't get distracted from key developments – or sometimes simply to make sure you're looking the right way.

True, *Observation* doesn't always find the perfect equilibrium between systems and story. But it doesn't fall far short of its aims. By the time its eye-opening endgame has played out, it's provided more memorable moments than games five times its length, with 50 times the budget. Kubrick would surely approve.



ABOVE This circuit board is potentially one of the more involving puzzles, but the ability to bring up protocols rather than having to recall them from memory means you can brute-force the solution quickly



MAIN The older the camera, the more realistic it looks. True, looking through lo-res feeds might wear thin over six to eight hours, but in these moments you could almost be watching a live feed from the ISS.

ABOVE The moment Emma first takes off her helmet feels like a bold step for a small studio. If the facial animation leaves a little to be desired, the central performance papers over the cracks.

LEFT Resume a saved game and you'll get a replay of the most recent cutscene with slightly different dialogue – a smart way of recapping crucial info so you know exactly what your next objective is

Post Script

Jon McKellan, creative director, *Observation*

The prototype for *Observation* was put together at the beginning of 2016, and quickly attracted interest. Having secured a publisher, developer No Code busied itself during the wait for contracts to be finalised by making *Stories Untold*, partly as a test bed for creative and technical ideas that would help inform its approach to *Observation*. Here, studio founder and creative director Jon McKellan discusses how to design computers for console, and finding the balance between narrative control and player freedom.

Although you're mostly working with computers in *Observation*, it feels as if the interface was designed with consoles in mind. Was that the case?

We knew it was going to be console right from the start, so we wanted to make sure everything felt accessible. There were a lot of things we had to think about, because we had a similar issue on *Stories Untold* with the text input, which just doesn't translate to console. We didn't want to get caught in that trap where there's clearly a better platform to play on because its controls are much more suited. So designing each mechanic was about making sure things felt right on a controller. I'm a big fan of sitting on the couch and enjoying the game the way you would watch a film, so making sure that can still be done comfortably was a big deal.

Was firstperson exploration always part of the plan?

Yeah, we always planned to have the spheres as part of the gameplay loop, and that they would get introduced gradually. It plays into the idea that to begin with, you feel restricted as an AI. And as SAM starts to evolve, so does the control scheme, and so do your options. So it was always on the cards to give you this limited set of views, and then at certain points to break you out of that and give you some more freedom to find stuff that the cameras can't see. And vice versa.

By contrast, you're happy to take control away from the player at certain times, whether it's cutscenes or locking into a specific camera feed...

We did play around a lot with that, thinking about how much autonomy the player should have, even during our narrative moments. And what we found is that it's quite a narratively dense game in certain places – where if you miss what's being said, it may make the next bit more tricky, or you're not going to understand quite so well what's happened. When we were doing playtests, people would just start moving the camera around and looking at random objects and not listening to what was being said. At one point, one of our testers said, 'So what am I supposed to do?' And we're like, 'Well, she just told you, but you were looking at a packet of food



"It was always on the cards to give you this limited set of views, and then at certain points to break you out of that"



somewhere.' It was a bit of a compromise, really – it was either let players have total freedom, but with a much higher chance that they'll not get what they're supposed to do or what's happening. Or we take a little bit of that freedom away, but it makes the next section a little bit easier to get through. And so we went for that option.

It's about narrative pacing, too, isn't it? Too much freedom and the story loses some of its momentum.

Yeah. I mean, we didn't want it to be explicitly linear the entire time. Once you get to the start of the second act at the main central area of the station, you're given freedom to look around in any camera and solve some of these individual problems that crop up, while looking for audio logs and things like that – that's where we give you the freedom to explore at your own pace. It's very difficult to tell a direct story and make sure people get it, while giving them the freedom to do anything they want. Even big open-world games like *Red Dead*, and *The Witcher*... as soon as you start a narrative mission, you're locked into those cutscenes and those boundaries. So even in the biggest titles, that seems to be the way to go: when learning what's happening in the story is the most important part, then you focus things in and make sure that's the experience that people get from it. Then when that becomes secondary to the puzzle solving you let go and let them have fun that way.

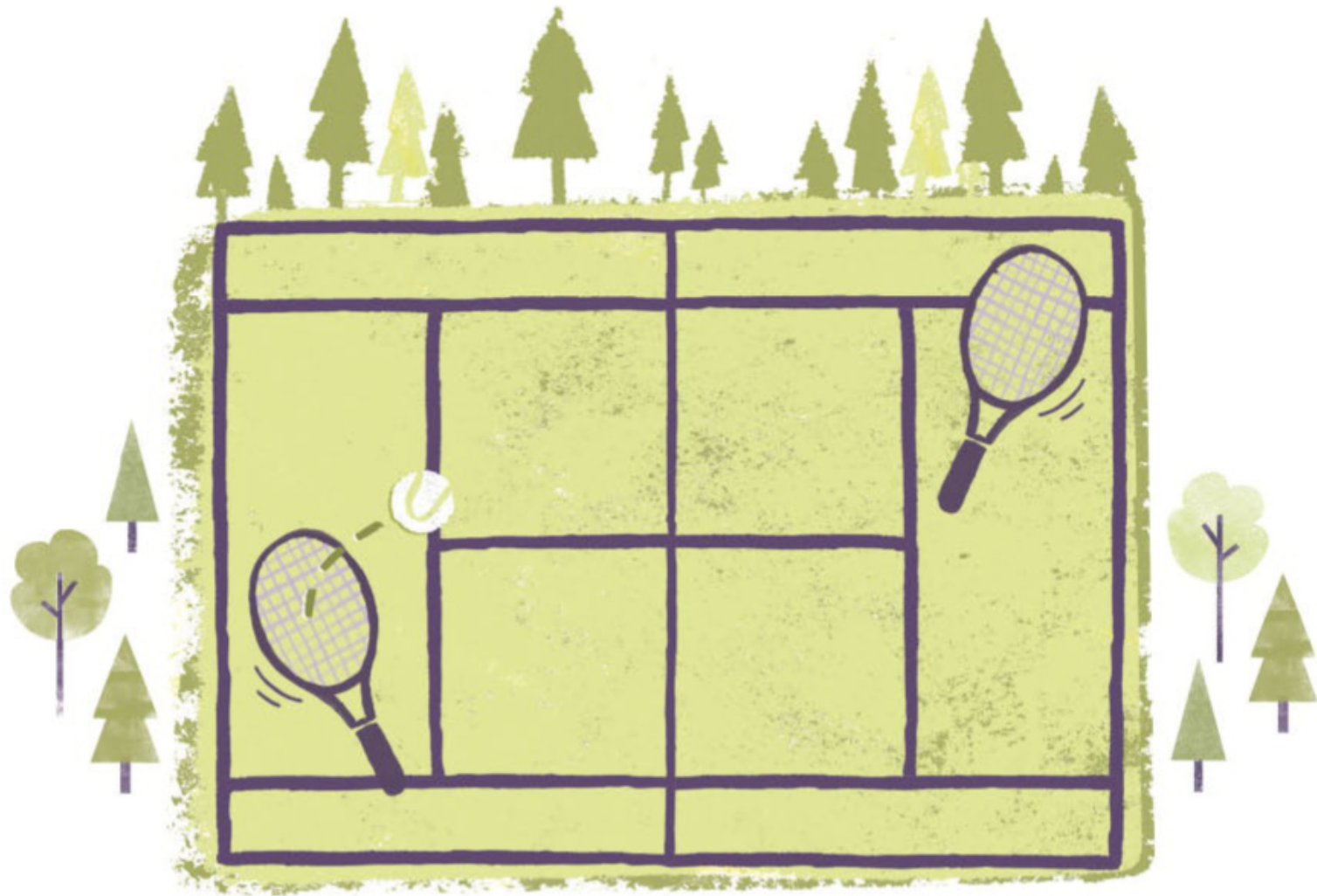
There's almost a latent *Metroid* influence in places, in the sense that SAM has lost his powers...

Absolutely. One of the tropes throughout all AI-based fiction is that the AI can start to improve itself or build upon itself and that's one of the big things to be frightened of. And so we wanted to get some layer of that in – that you're creatively trying to solve a problem and gradually improving yourself as part of that process.

Can you tell us about the casting process?

I was the UI guy on *Alien Isolation*, and met Kez on that shoot. When we started the project, we had a casting director who started looking for people. We had three different people do voice work at different stages. I'd kept in touch with Kez on Facebook, and we were coming up to some internal milestone just over a year ago. We needed some dialogue, and we couldn't get the actress we had been using temporarily. So I messaged Kez and said, 'Have you got a studio? Can you help us out?' And she did it. And it was perfect. The answer was under our noses the whole time. It helped that she and Anthony [Howell], who plays SAM, had worked together, because Anthony was Samuels in *Alien*. So they were aware of each other, and I'd heard those voices together before and that made it easier to direct the dialogue. ■

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Rage 2

There are a number of game development jobs we wouldn't do for any price: modelling rocks, for instance. Yet we've always fancied a go at naming things. We could do you a pretty good *Destiny* arsenal, we reckon, and could cook up excellent business names for a future *Grand Theft Auto*. To that list we would like to add the job of naming NPCs in a future *Rage* sequel. Lord only knows what Avalanche's narrative team were on during *Rage 2*'s development, but we want some of it: it's given us the likes of Peely Wally, Chris Le Dong and Mike Chinwag. Whatever the source of that creative spark, it's given them the chutzpah to aim high: sat on a toilet in Wellspring, stroking the rat on his lap, is one Wimothy Tillits, a dead ringer for Id boss Tim Willits.

They weren't the only team having some fun. *Rage*'s combat is riotous, frantically paced and tremendously entertaining, Id's influence apparent in the crisp gunplay and Avalanche's flair for the outlandish shining through in a suite of absurdly powerful abilities. There is nothing here that is new, as such – shoulder charges, ground pounds and deployable shields; a gravity gun, incendiary pistol and the latest in a long line of wondrous Id Software shotguns – but everything is executed with such panache, such pop and crack and high-tech fizz, that it is impossible not to fall in love with it all.

Each weapon has three fire modes, the third only possible during Overdrive, a time-limited buff state that also ratchets up your movement speed, health regeneration, rate of fire, damage output and the backing track. While it's notionally comparable to a *Destiny* super, it's much quicker to recharge, a few quick kills building a combo meter and accelerating the ability's cooldown. It's the clearest sign of how Avalanche and Id expect you to play the game – on the front foot, up in enemy faces, forever on the brink of overcommitment.

That's the case from minute one, though only to a point: per the open-world style guide, *Rage 2* spends its early hours in a little too low a gear. You've only a pistol and assault rifle, and start with no abilities – protagonist Walker pilfers armour from the corpse of a Ranger super-soldier, and the adventure begins. New toys are acquired from Arks, drop pods that can only be opened by Rangers but are typically guarded by an enemy faction. A few are marked on your map, but most have to be sought out in a rare example of the game's open world justifying its existence. Activate Focus, a Detective mode facsimile that highlights enemy positions, while in the open world and a beam of light shines down on any Ark in the region. The world is full of mountains, ravines and chasms, its road network necessarily twisty, and so the Ark hunt is not just about pinpointing a location, but also working out how to get to it. It's an obvious nod to *Breath Of The Wild*, and quite a welcome one in a land that otherwise follows the Ubi-style open-world playbook almost to the letter.

Developer Avalanche Studios, Id Software
Publisher Bethesda Softworks
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

Avalanche and Id expect you to play the game on the front foot, up in enemy faces, forever on the brink of overcommitment



HELL ON WHEELS

While the upgrade paths for weapons and abilities give us just about enough incentive to explore the open world, we ignore the vehicle upgrade menu – and, if we're honest, the vehicles themselves. While there's a pleasant heft to the handling model, *Rage 2*'s array of cars, motorbikes and tanks rarely feel like more than a necessary evil, the thing that ferries you between mission objectives with a GPS overlay that causes you to frequently fly past the turning you were supposed to take. Any car you find in the world can be taken to a town and stored or sold on, though the default Phoenix, an all-rounder with a nitro boost of such long duration and such a short cooldown that it might as well always be switched on, is all you'll ever need.

But only almost. An open world is not just a freely explorable spread of activities; it should also convey a sense of place, giving context and purpose to a game and the stakes of its story. While there is magic in *Rage 2*'s combat arenas, out on the open road it falls apart. Sure, it's a wasteland, but emptiness isn't the game's problem. Rather it's that it fails to present its world as anything other than an interactive mission menu, and too nakedly uses it as padding to extend the runtime of a breezy campaign. There's a tightly focused, thrillingly enjoyable six-hour FPS campaign in here, but it's been stretched to double that length across a map that spaces mission objectives six kilometres apart. There are only three fast travel points on the map, and few are ever convenient for where you need to go next.

You can't speed through it, since progression is intrinsically tied to the side-mission icons that spread across the map as you talk to quest givers and find location hints on discarded tablet computers. Completing activities, and looting the areas that house them, is your only reliable source of the materials you'll need to upgrade weapons, abilities and your core stats. It's not a disaster: it means more opportunities to put that marvellous combat system to work, and the upgrades themselves are well worth chasing (perks are impactful, and a weapon's final upgrade node affords a character-wide damage boost). But it means you're more often dragged off the beaten path by a sense of duty – 'I have to do this' – than by curiosity ('I want to'). You too often feel you're going through the motions, and in the process whatever momentum the main story might have been building is lost.

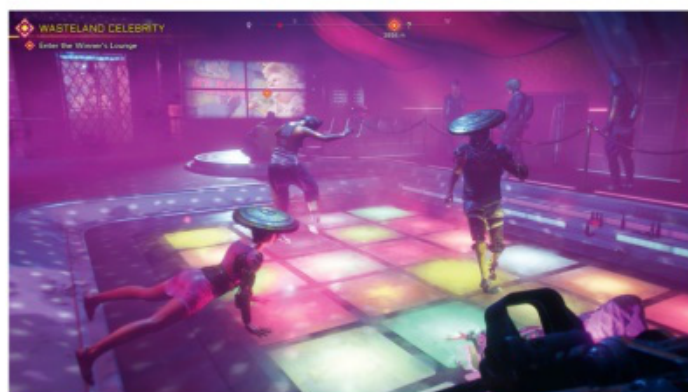
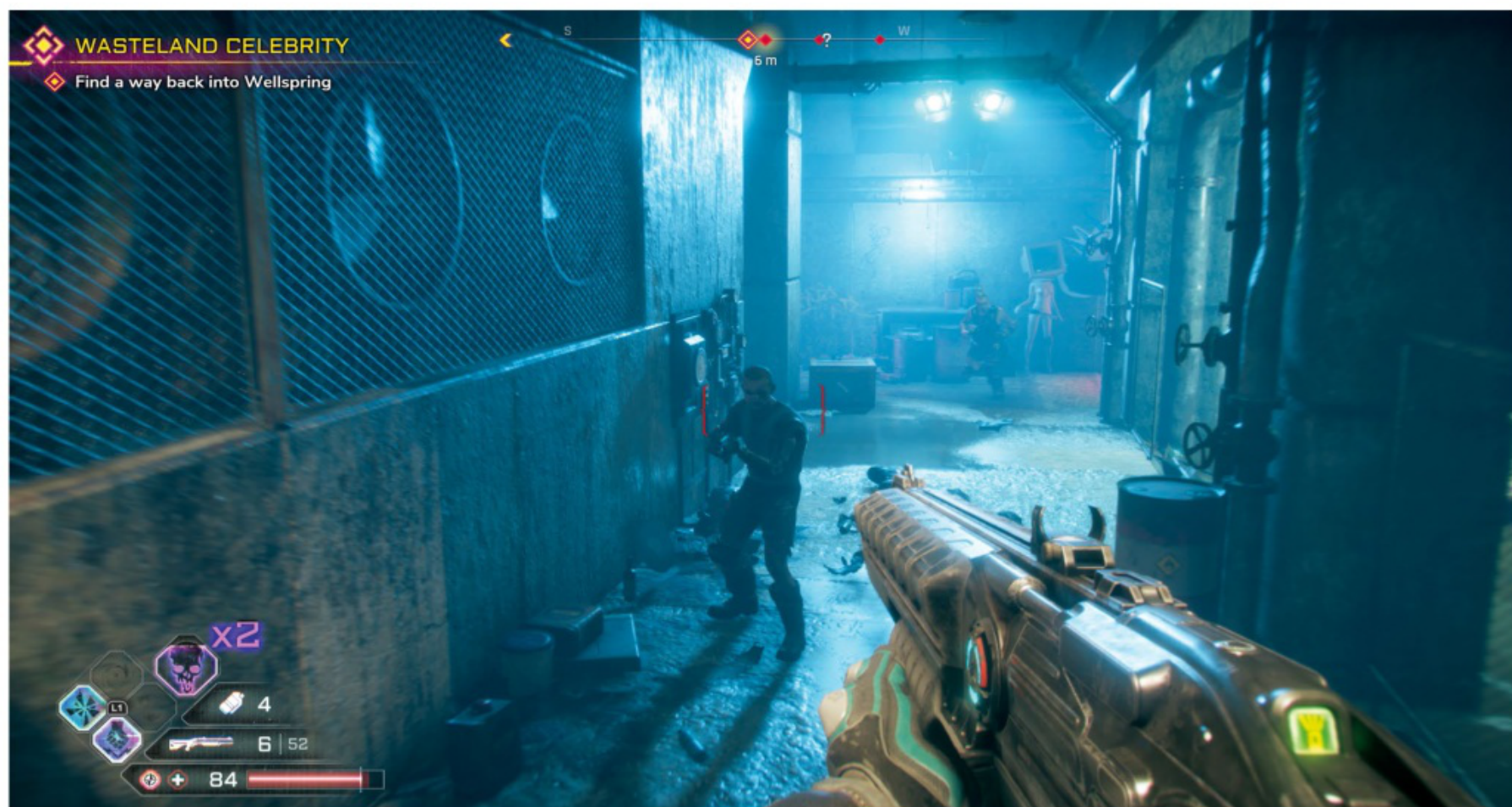
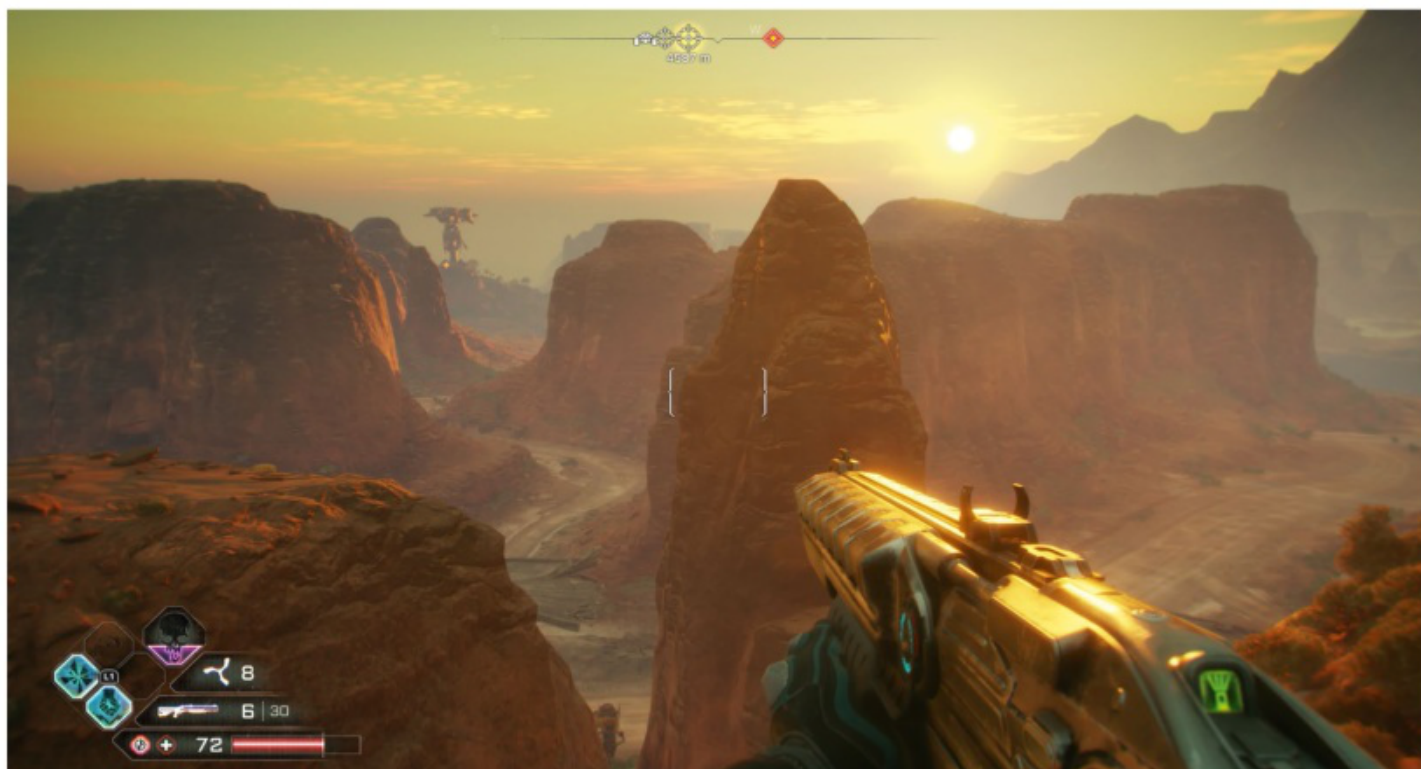
It's no technical triumph, either – a disappointment given Id's involvement – and once again it's the open world that's seemingly at fault. The game only hits 60fps on PS4 Pro and Xbox One, and even then only at 1080p, with no HDR. Things improve markedly on PC, but even then it swings wildly between a handsome game and a hideous one. And, in true genre tradition, bugs are prevalent. That limited fast-travel tool sometimes deletes itself; mission scripts fail to trigger, forcing a reload; vehicles get stuck on scenery; menu screens are laggy, and typos dot the game like item pickups.

Rage 2 is a conceptual cut-and-shut, blending Id's best-in-class combat chops with Avalanche's well-ploughed furrow of open-world mayhem. It at once delivers on that idea and somehow falls short of it, the relentless thrill of one half of it dragged down by the barren, boring, needless sprawl of the other, that is in turn occasionally elevated above its station by those delicious guns and abilities. We think of those NPC names again – of Slaghead, of Brucer, of Rory Success. If only the world they live in had been crafted with a similar disregard for convention.

RIGHT Yes, okay, it's not without its moments of beauty – though the prettier vistas merely make the lack of HDR more frustrating.

MAIN Lighting is all over the place, with some pitch-black rooms only navigable by following highlighted pick-up options. Did all the world's flashlights die in the apocalypse?

BOTTOM The first time we fight one of these brutes, we run entirely out of ammo, and the battle lasts 20 minutes. This one, late in the game, fell in seconds. The shotgun may be our favourite weapon, but you'll want the rocket launcher too



ABOVE The writing team reach for a blend of *Borderlands* and *Fallout 4* that never quite comes off. These dancers are entertaining a Trumpian antagonist who, despite it all, we're supposed to take seriously

Void Bastards

The Krell fuel tanker Winsome Pugilist is a squat vessel, with corridor-sized tubes protruding from each flank. The floor is splatted with puddles of radioactive materials and – health and safety be damned – stacks of cheese and onion sandwiches. Above all, the entire ship’s security systems are switched permanently off. No Gunpoints, no Peepers, no Secbots to worry about. It emboldens us to scour every corner for fuel cans, machine parts and snacks until we’ve got enough supplies to jump to the far side of the Nebula.

Every game of *Void Bastards* plays out on two scales: firstperson looting runs on spaceships, and an *FTL*-style galaxy map where you chart a course between these ships. As in a dual-layered game like *XCOM*, resources link the two. Fuel and food collected on ships decide the number of hops you can make on the map before being forced to board another for supplies. Looted parts can be used to build or upgrade weapons and tools.

This means each half is constantly feeding into the other. Your thirst for a better pistol might send you to a far corner of the galaxy in search of a pneumatic tube, while discovering a torpedo in a ship’s locker will allow you to beat back pirates, opening new routes on the star map. There’s a main path to follow, travelling to certain ships and raiding them for parts to build story-relevant items, but you’re encouraged to scribble your own goals in the margins. So you weigh up the map, with its summary of each ship, the loot and enemies within, and consider: is it worth docking or should you just zoom by?

If you do decide to explore, there’s a chance to assemble your current arsenal of guns and gadgets into a three-part loadout before you’re pushed through the airlock onto hostile ground and into a firstperson shooter. Except, before a single bullet can be fired, you’re presented with another map and invited to sketch out a plan: helm first, then loop around through the generator, into the engine room, and back to the exit.

Then you watch those plans fall apart. Either because a fight didn’t go your way – combat is a little clumsy and unsatisfying, especially with the early-game weapons – or, more often, because you allowed yourself to get comfortable, wondered if you could extend the planned route to take in just one more room, one more locker of loot, and then turned the next corner to something horribly unexpected. Being good at *Void Bastards* is less about aiming a gun than it is estimating how long you can balance enemies, environmental hazards and an ever-dwindling oxygen supply before fleeing to the airlock – an option that’s always open to you. Well, almost always.

Aboard the Otori warp craft Yatate, the power is out, drenching the interior in red backup lighting. More importantly, it seals the airlock, barring escape until we can reactivate power. In the dark, we slip on some oil, giving movement all the grace and precision of socks on

Developer Blue Manchu
Publisher Humble Bundle
Format PC (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

Every game plays out on two scales: firstperson looting runs on spaceships, and an *FTL*-style galaxy map



SPACE ODDITY

It might not be an especially deep work of speculative fiction, but *Void Bastards*’ setting is certainly vivid. The world has its own ersatz vocabulary: cameras are Peepers, turrets are Gunpoints, the shotgun-style gun is a Stapler. The game’s startling comic-book visuals pay homage to weekly British anthology 2000 AD, with a broad stripe of satire and lurid throwaway sci-fi concepts recalling its Future Shock strips in particular, but there’s a dose of Viz in *Void Bastards*’ sense of humour. Among the collectible items are duct tape, distended testicles and cans of Ion Bru, while enemies, from Juves to Screws, announce their arrival with a wide selection of charmingly region-specific British swearwords. In space, it seems, *everyone* can hear you scream “Oi, nobhead!”

laminate. Nevertheless, we skid our way to the generator and pull the switch, restoring power to all systems – including the Gunpoint turret on the far side of the room, its mounted machine gun suddenly roaring to life.

Death in *Void Bastards* is just another resource to manage. And life is pretty cheap. Your robot managers fill out a P45 and rehydrate the next lucky prisoner, stored as powder on the mothership. You lose all fuel, food and ammo, but get to keep the parts you’ve collected and any gadgets built with them. The game rolls a new character, with their own name, mugshot and special attributes, and an all-new constellation of ships is laid out in front of them.

Like your character, every ship is procedurally generated. And though the level layouts don’t change – each class has a fixed floorplan – they summon more personality than the succession of prisoners you chew through as you play. The PAC dinghy Quantum Unicorn is a cosy two-room, rich with loot but crammed with swarms of floating heads. The Lux cruise ship Pure Fromage, with its ballroom looking out into space, has all the faded glory of a seafront hotel. On the Buzz frigate Winter’s Anvil, half the inhabitants fight on our side, the mutant janitors turning against their oppressors.

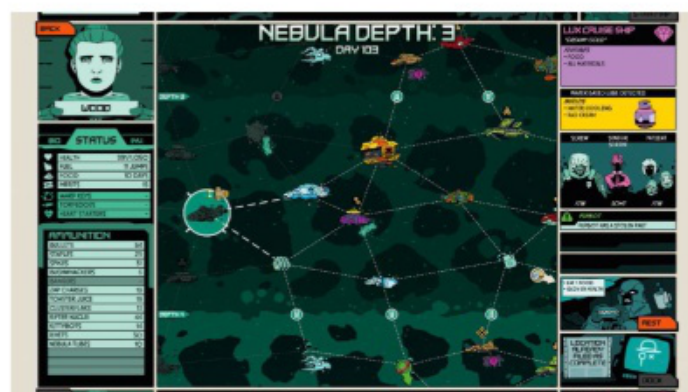
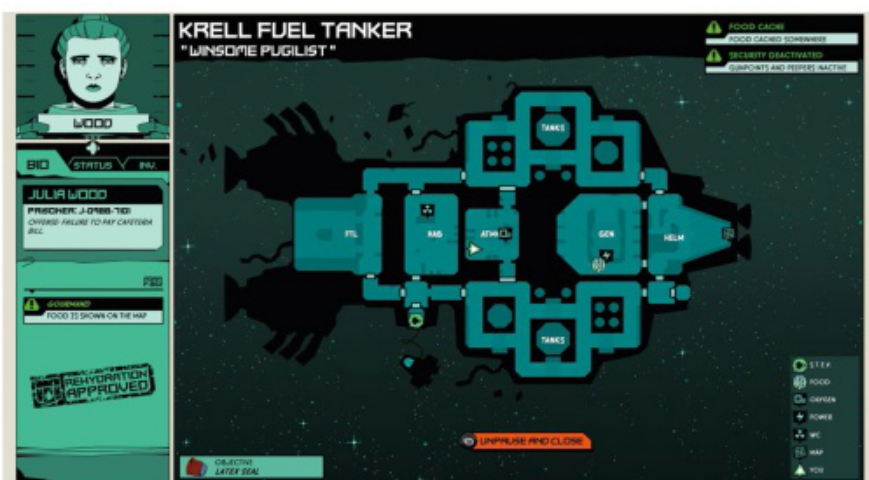
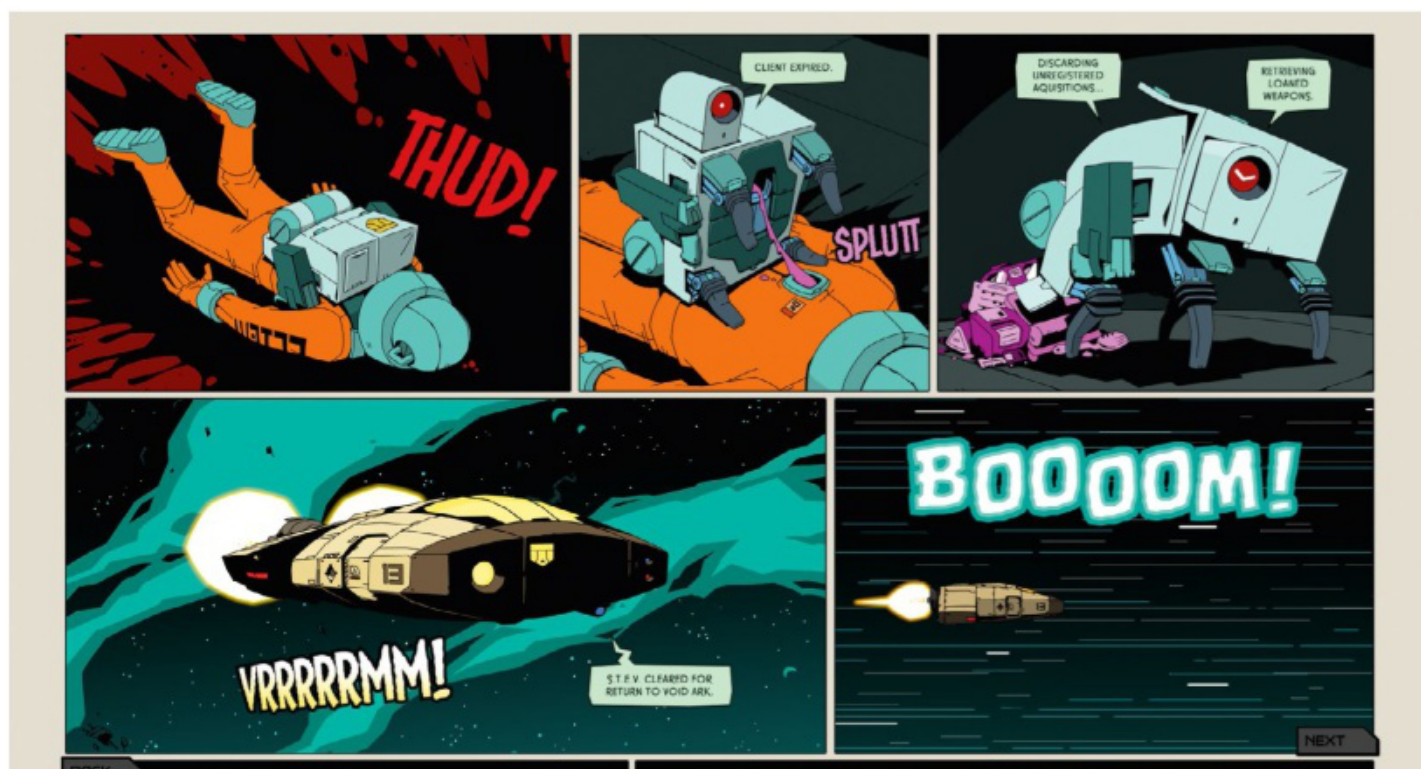
A whole galaxy of procedurally generated levels.

It takes a little while for *Void Bastards* to get its hooks into you – the basic pistol feels stodgy, ship layouts can be a little baffling, the feedback loop between the two layers isn’t immediately obvious – but once it does, the thrill of seeing what the game will generate next becomes hard to refuse.

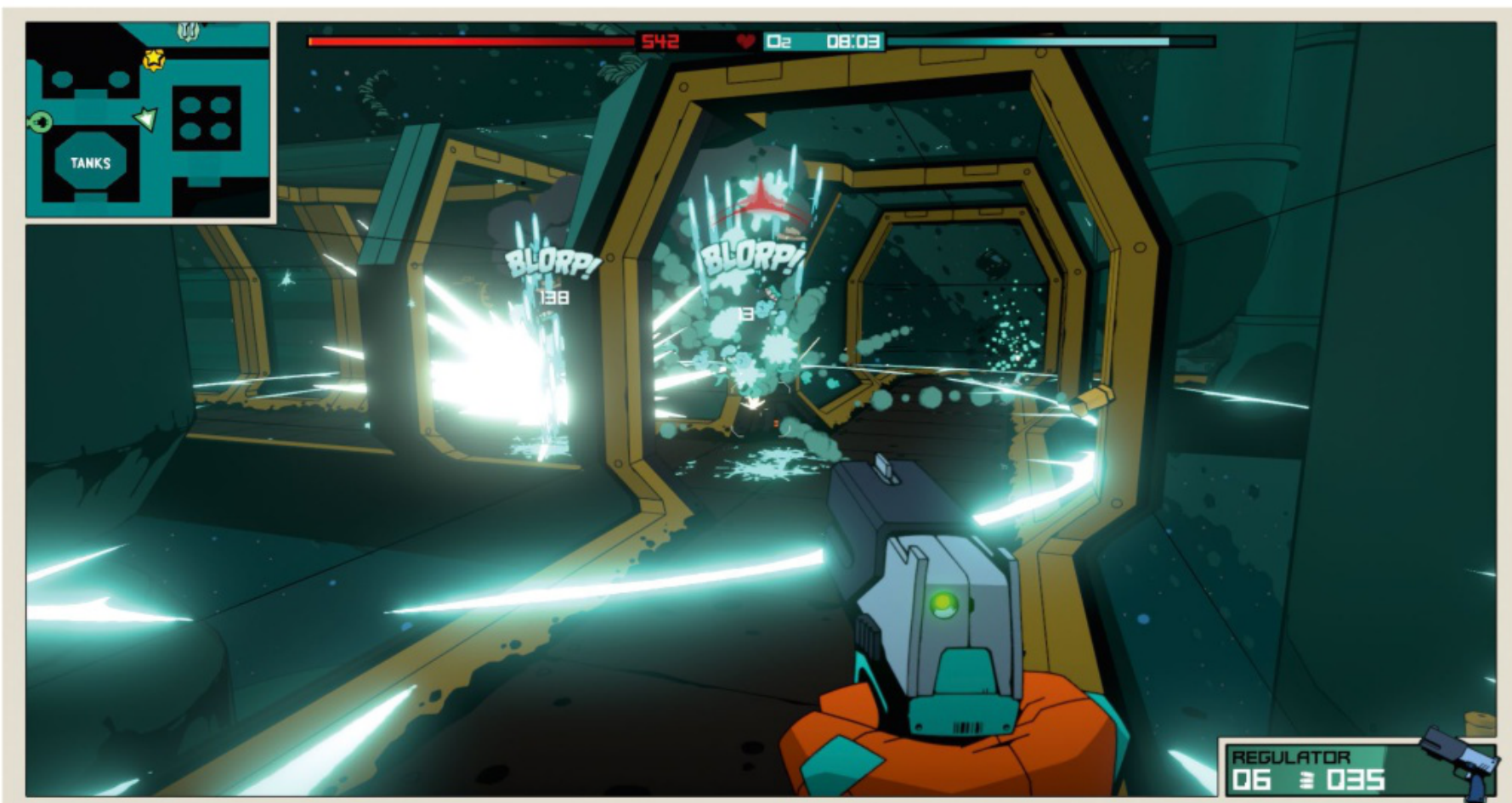
It’s around this point that the range of available tools opens up, offering new ways to probe at the contents of each ship. A zapper to temporarily deactivate security measures, and a hacking tool to make them target enemies. A rifle that can shoot through glass and cluster bombs designed to be thrown through a doorway, before locking it until the sound effects have died down. And the game’s crowning glory, the Rifter, which sucks its target out of reality then dumps them back wherever you point – perhaps on exposed electrical wiring, or in front of a hacked Gunpoint turret, or inside an ejector chute that empties out into space.

It makes for an excellent toybox, and the game’s structure forces you to play with every last thing inside, because the next ship has thrown up a new combination of threats or because you failed to pick up ammunition on the last one. The joy of *Void Bastards*, once it reveals itself, is that no action, no decision, is standalone. Right now, you might be aboard the Oklahoma Creek, but everything you do is informed by what you did on the Kind Herald, is feeding into what you’ll do next on the St Theodora. Provided, of course, you just don’t die out in the void.

RIGHT *Void Bastards* commits fully to its comic-book presentation, with cutscenes broken up into animated panels and a UI that has you scrolling down a single 'page'. **BELOW** The shape of each ship is visible as soon as you arrive. For more details on what it contains, you'll need to head to the helm. **MAIN** Every moment in the shooter segments is accompanied with comic-style sound effects. They're a stylish visual, but also provide a handy way of identifying where enemies are patrolling



ABOVE Previewing a ship's inhabitants guides your approach: swarms of Patients might encourage packing explosives, while more slow-moving but powerful enemies are best dispatched with the long-range Toaster



Team Sonic Racing

Of all the company mascots to receive their own kart-racing game – Sonic, Mario, Diddy Kong, even Crash Bandicoot – the hedgehog famed primarily for fleetness of foot always seemed a strange choice. It's not only the peculiarity of putting those red sneakers on an accelerator pedal; beyond the immediate draws of Tails and Knuckles, there's not a particularly deep bench of beloved characters to fill out the starting grid. After all, who out there is really itching to pick Zavok or Blaze The Cat from the character select screen?

The previous Sonic racer from Sumo Digital, 2012's *Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed*, solved this problem by opening up its roster to include characters from *Super Monkey Ball*, *Crazy Taxi* and, memorably, *Football Manager*. More importantly, it washed away any lingering sense of dissonance by virtue of being a tight arcade racer wrapped up in a great gimmick: tracks and vehicles that switched between land, sea and air.

As the title suggests, the big idea of *Team Sonic Racing* is that you'll never race alone. The cast of motoring creatures is grouped into teams of three, with the final result based on their combined performance. It's easy for a first-place victory to be dragged down by a couple of behind-the-pack teammates, so you'll need to work together to achieve shared success – a goal that's made more attainable by a few mechanical tweaks to the basic wheels-on-tarmac experience.

The lead racer on each team leaves a never-ending slipstream in their wake, a glowing golden path that allies can follow for a speed boost, cementing the old kart-racer maxim that it's more fun, and often profitable, to be in second place than first. Spun-out racers can be revived with a nudge from a friend as they speed past. Unwanted power-ups can be traded between teammates, too, so if you find yourself out in front, laden with rockets and no one to fire them at, they can simply be passed along to a friend in need.

In truth, you'll likely want to do this whatever the circumstances, both because trading comes with a chance of accessing heftier triplicate variants of power-ups, and because it's one of the quickest ways of filling your team's shared power meter. Once full, you can trigger a Team Ultimate, pumping nitrous into all three tanks for a brief spell of invincibility and a speed boost. It's a potential race-winner, especially if deployed on the final lap, and well worth steering your entire strategy towards.

Meanwhile, whether you're playing solo or in multiplayer (online and split-screen options are both available) the game is constantly tossing out voice lines from your teammates, communicating their current status. It's a level of chattiness that, given the traditional quality of Sonic voice acting, isn't entirely welcome – especially as each line is also presented in a text box, obscuring the track in front of you.

Developer Sumo Digital
Publisher Sega
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Switch, Xbox One
Release Out now

It feels like the game is trying to create the illusion of teamwork to hide the fact that it doesn't matter all that much



THE LONELY ROAD

For any players struggling to assemble their own erinaceous avengers, *Team Sonic Racing* offers a decently robust singleplayer campaign. Look past the cheap-looking cutscenes with their static character cut-outs – something the game itself encourages by making 'skip story' the default option for each race – and you'll find some interesting variants on the standard format. There are solo drifting challenges; elimination races where every lap narrows down the competition; and time trials which task you with dodging or taking out robotic enemies. As with any game of this type, *Team Sonic Racing* comes alive with friends – ideally, all crammed onto the same sofa – but the campaign is a pleasant way to spend the time between team-ups.

At times, it feels like the game is trying to create the illusion of teamwork to hide the fact that, in reality, it doesn't matter all that much. If you can hold your trio in a tight formation, it is possible to trade slipstreams and constantly slingshot off one other, but otherwise, about the biggest decision that teamwork adds is which path to follow when tracks diverge. Although each character is assigned a class (Speed, Technique or Power) team composition doesn't have any tangible benefits, and knowing your teammate is in need – because, say, Tails is shouting "I'm way in back!" – doesn't do much to affect your approach. Ultimately, the best tactic is the same as any other racer: maintain speed, avoid crashes and stick as close as possible to the perfect racing line. To quote the hedgehog himself, you gotta go fast.

Like its predecessor, *Team Sonic Racing* is great at these fundamentals. Tracks alternate between tight chokepoints, encouraging cars to jostle for position, and wide open roads for drifting – richly rewarding both in the resulting speed boost and the sheer pleasure of it. There's a sense that every moment spent without your finger on the left trigger, throwing out the back wheels and nudging the curve of your drift this way or that, is a moment wasted. Less satisfying is the other essential half of the karting formula: the power-ups. Your arsenal covers all the usual suspects (projectiles, in manual and homing varieties; speed boosts; lightning zaps) but that's obfuscated by the decision to present each power-up as one of the 'Wisp' creatures introduced in *Sonic Colors*. This hurts their immediate visual readability, as you struggle to remember which power is assigned to the violet Wisp and which to the cyan one.

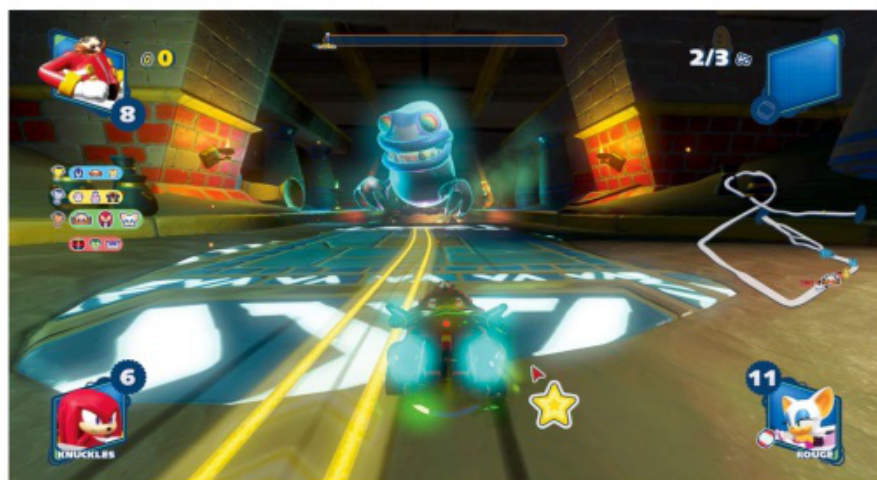
This contributes to a larger sense that *Team Sonic Racing* is undergoing a mild identity crisis. The game never manages to sell you on the idea that it *has* to be these characters behind the wheel, or this world under your tyres. The tracks twist and corkscrew pleasantly but, Sega-blue skies aside, they don't do much to evoke classic Sonic imagery. It's perhaps admirable that Sumo bypasses Green Hill Zone but, unless you're a devotee of the past decade of Sonic continuity, the result comes off a little generic. Including a ghost-themed track called 'Boo's House', for example, feels like it's inviting comparisons that are probably better avoided.

There are areas where *Team Sonic Racing* can stand up to comparisons with the very best in class – namely, the joyous feel of guiding its karts around its tracks. Once upon a time, simply offering this experience beyond the walls of a Nintendo console might have been enough, but with the rest of the pack approaching in its rear-view – the nostalgia-boosted *Crash Team Racing* is only a month behind – a slightly muddled gimmick and dilute sense of identity mean Sonic is unlikely to outpace the competition.

RIGHT The effect of a Team Ultimate remains the same whichever team is using it. After the character-specific powers featured in *All-Stars*, it feels like a slight missed opportunity.

BELOW There's a range of online modes to keep things varied, limiting racers to a single power-up or regularly dropping lightning bolts that can only be dodged with a well-timed dose of invincibility.

MAIN Cars can be customised inside and out, with more parts accessed by spending in-game credits on randomised lootboxes – vestigial traces, perhaps, of a microtransaction structure that thankfully never came to pass



ABOVE While the campaign groups its trios along thematic lines – Sonic, Knuckles and Tails versus villains Robotnik, Metal Sonic and Zavok – online that's abandoned, leading to teams of two Shadows and one Big The Cat



Outer Wilds

Thank goodness that in space no-one can hear you scream, otherwise our reputation as an intrepid explorer would be in tatters. At first glance, the autumnal colours and painterly geometries of *Outer Wilds* – not to mention a lovingly simulated marshmallow-roasting mechanic – suggest relaxed space-camping. The reality is quite different. Gigantic anglerfish, landmass-juggling cyclones, caves filling up with sand, moon rocks that move whenever we're not looking directly at them, yawning black holes that spit us into the other side of the solar system: we know now that we are terrified of all of these things, and more besides. Honestly, a sugar rush seems more our speed.

But we can't sit by the campfire forever, because there's a mystery to unpick. The world keeps ending. Over the course of 22 in-game minutes, the sun gets bigger, redder and angrier until it finally explodes – and we wake up by the fire again, with all our memories of the previous time loop intact. And so, little by little, curiosity overcomes fear as we tentatively push at the boundaries of what is surely one of the most inventive, captivating and masterfully designed settings in the history of videogames.

In a refreshing twist on what has become the norm for many exploration-based games, Mobius Digital's dinky solar system might be about as wide as a puddle, leapt (or rather, flown) across in a matter of moments, but it has the depth of an ocean. And, much like the sea, it oscillates between joyful and positively Lovecraftian. Its planets are not simply prettied-up globes to land on and pillage before moving onto the next: each has its own bizarre set of rules, turning them into magnificent astrophysical puzzles. A robust physics system that's part-science, part-fiction allows you to invent semi-fantastical locomotion solutions: you can use gravity wells to slingshot yourself across chasms or, when floating in zero-G and out of fuel, launch your Little Scout (a camera drone) in the opposite direction to propel you forward à la Newton's Third Law.

You start with all the tools you'll ever need: your ship, the Little Scout, a jetpack, a flashlight and a Signalscope to track audio signals. To traverse planets successfully, you must get to know their quirks. Some of this is done by simply observing – how (and when) certain chunks of Brittle Hollow's fragile crust, for instance, are dislodged by volcanic blasts from its orbiting moon. But much of your exploring is led by the writings of the Nomai, a now-absent alien race that crash-landed in this solar system on a mission of their own, and recorded their scientific findings. It's not resources, abilities or upgrades, but snippets of knowledge (stored in your ship's log as an ever-expanding web of "rumours") that open up *Outer Wilds*. Tales from underground settlements; hints about alternative passageways into laboratories; the

Developer Mobius Digital
Publisher Annapurna Interactive
Format PC, Xbox One (tested)
Release Out now

Curiosity
 overcomes fear
 as we tentatively
 push at the
 boundaries of
 one of the most
 inventive settings
 in videogames



KNOW YOUR PLACE

The museum on your home planet of Timber Hearth is one of the best tutorial areas we've ever encountered. It's one of the few locations in the game that are compulsory, as it's in the museum that you'll find the launch codes for your ship. Its exhibits are at once fascinating and instructive, introducing many of the mechanics you'll encounter out on your travels: quantum moon rocks, gravity crystals, orbits, supernovas and so on. It's here, too, where you'll experience a strange event involving a Nomai statue that sets up the premise for the 22-minute time loop. It also sets up one of *Outer Wilds*' main themes nicely: namely, that of the importance of history and culture, and the myriad benefits of standing on the shoulders of giants.

rules to a popular Nomai children's game that innocently reveal a dangerous creature's weakness.

It's a hell of a way to build a world. There are no nagging objectives or indicators; you explore exactly as far as your knowledge, curiosity or sheer dumb luck takes you. The ship's log, Nomai writings and hints from NPCs keep things purposefully vague – an orange asterisk on a log entry indicates when you haven't completely stripped a certain location of its information, but you'll soon figure out that doing so isn't mandatory – and so progress is mostly made in your own head. You infer, deduce, and follow your nose, and it's to Mobius' credit that more often than not you find something significant at the end of it.

Knowledge is, essentially, the game's reward system. The explosion of the sun might be a downer (and, like everything in *Outer Wilds*, so audiovisually intimidating that it inspires actual dread and awe) but waking up once more and bouncing towards your ship knowing that your latest find has connected more of the dots makes for a compulsive positive feedback loop. Discovery is everywhere, and the quality of the world, combined with the generosity and confidence with which you're handed it, makes this a true adventure game to rival the likes of *Breath Of The Wild*.

Inevitably, the pace of new revelations dwindles, and so too the most visible and potent source of endorphins – a new line in the ship's log. The locales become ever less mysterious. And it's when your goals become more specific, and urgent, that bolder design choices can grate. If you haven't wrapped your head around a complex concept (the game does devious things with quantum mechanics) then trial-and-error is waylaid by strict timers – the heat death of the universe and a restarted loop included. When you *have* worked out what to do, perfect execution of thruster boosts, warp pad activations or a finicky input is sometimes critical. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the lead-up to a shudder-inducingly brilliant ending that reveals just enough to allow you to put all the pieces of the mystery in place – and that surely only a very few will go through the rigmarole of seeing.

Then again, there's an argument to be made that this suits *Outer Wilds*. The Chosen One trope is in full effect, but this is a story about a Chosen One who chooses themselves, one ordinary adventurer who reaches down deep and pushes themselves to the ends of the universe to make the one last leap that no-one else could. You only really get anywhere meaningful if you go through it, it says, and Mobius has certainly made some risky decisions with much of *Outer Wilds*' design. But rare is the game that comes along, one that believes in its hero – in you – so earnestly, and shows us the real value of being brave.



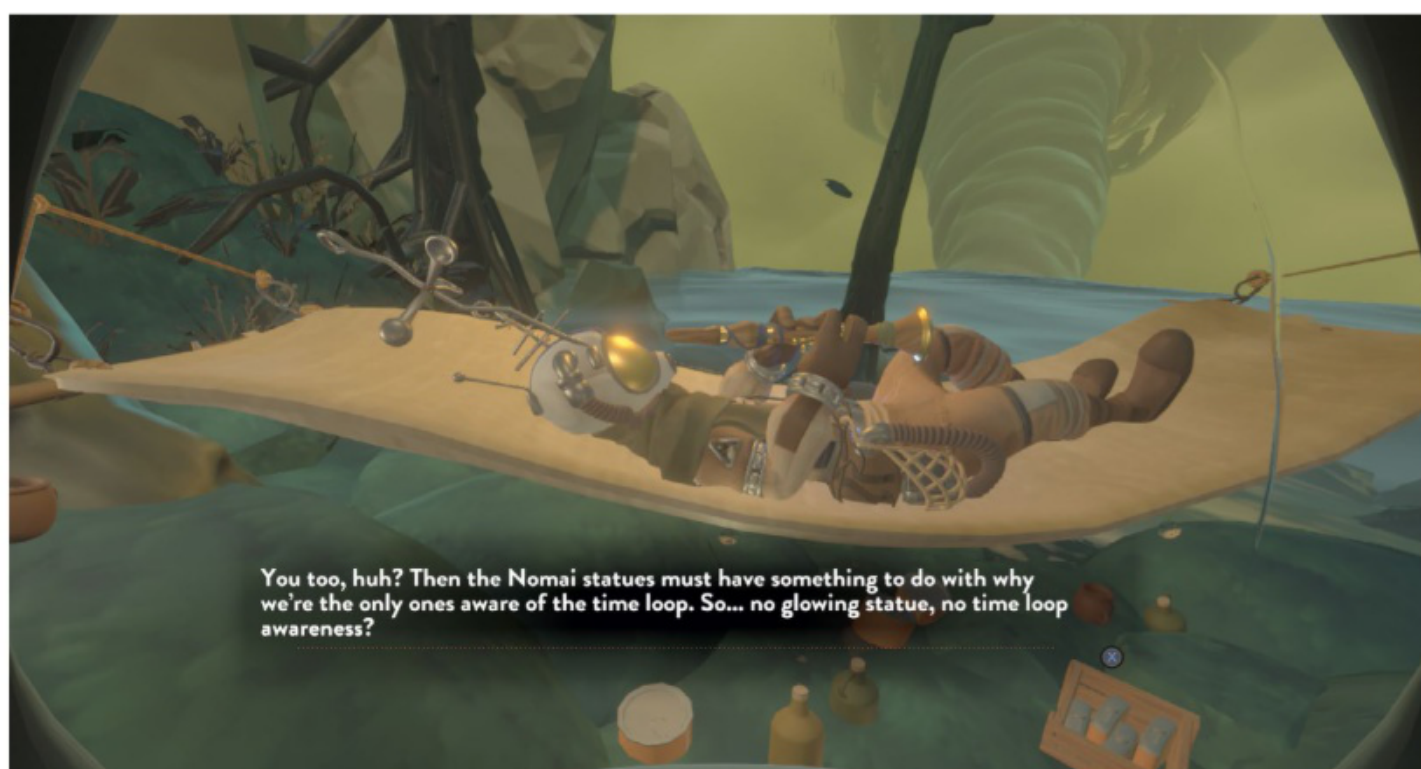
ABOVE The soundtrack plays infrequently, but is used to stunning effect. A theme begins to play in the minutes before the sun explodes, your cue to hurriedly finish a puzzle – or seek out a place from which to enjoy the view



TOP Posters inside your delightfully rickety ship serve as further tutorials. We chuckle at a crudely drawn diagram of an alien looking at a tree to refill his oxygen, before we get out into the world and realise it's not a joke.

MAIN NPCs are few and far between: that's probably for the best, as the writing can vary in quality. The world is so believably alive that the handful of characters inside it can often seem rather wooden in comparison.

RIGHT This cheerful traveller is – for reasons that become clear if you poke around – one of the only others aware of the time loop. They'll also teach you the only (and highly useful) 'ability' in the game on a return visit



You too, huh? Then the Nomai statues must have something to do with why we're the only ones aware of the time loop. So... no glowing statue, no time loop awareness?

Blood & Truth

What's your weapon of choice? For us it's always been the pump-action shotgun, but we can't abide *Blood & Truth's* implementation of it. It's all risk and too little reward. What has always been, to us, the purest expression of the super-soldier power fantasy is transformed by virtual reality into, well, *reality*. This is what would happen if you put a pump-action shotty into our real-life hands and dropped us in a battlefield: we'd miss the first shot, remember we had to pump before letting off the second slug, then miss with that as well. Cut to teary family members at our funeral, then fade to black.

This happens time and again in the six or so hours that comprise *Blood & Truth's* campaign. The first time we happen upon an assault rifle an hour or so into the game, we feel a thrill at the thought of videogaming's Old Reliable being in our hands at last. But you know those holographic sights that, in regular FPS games, make lining up headshots a breeze? They don't even appear unless you're holding the gun correctly, and we most certainly are not. And sniper rifles? Forget it. Surrendering your peripheral vision for a difficult all-or-nothing shot is asking for trouble. And the dozens of cockerney goons of the opposition are only too happy to provide it, typically while shouting something unkind about your proficiency with a weapon.

Happily, *Blood & Truth* does not insist you learn the ins and outs of every gun in the game. Pickups are strewn about with liberal cheer; sure, it might insist you start a mission with nought but a silenced pistol in your hand, but within minutes you'll have a revolver on your right hip, a machine pistol on your left and, if you're anything like us, a submachine gun slung over each shoulder. We've never really taken to SMGs; in so many other games they feel like a halfway house between assault rifle and shotgun, the sweet spot in their effective range easily covered by other options and the extremes of it outclassed by the alternatives. Here they are tremendously satisfying and absolutely devastating, especially when dual wielded. We like to pretend it's because now the gun's in our virtual hands, we can control the recoil. In truth it's probably because SIE London Studio realised that scoped and pump-action weapons are a bit fiddly, and bestowed unto us a laser.

If this all seems like too much talk about guns, then forgive us. But *Blood & Truth* is defined by them; at its core this is an on-rails shooter with supplementary minigames posing as mechanics. It is a sort of *Operation Wolf VR*, albeit one with climbing, and lockpicking, and clipboards that you can throw away after you've read them. These pace-breakers are designed to ensure you don't get tired of the gunplay that comprises the meat of the game: a few seconds of Move controller twist and turn to plant some C4, breach a door, light a fuse or pan

Developer/publisher
SIE (London Studio)
Format PSVR
Release Out now

At its core this is an on-rails shooter with supplementary minigames posing as mechanics



YOU FACKIN' CAN'T

When not on a mission, you're essentially a sentient rock, standing or sitting still while the supporting cast push the story on for you. You can still get involved, however. Move around in your seat and if a character is looking at you, they'll adjust their gaze to maintain eye contact. And using a button on the Move controller you can cycle between hand gestures of varying levels of absurdity and rudeness. Only rarely are you a true bystander, the most jarring instance of which involves an ally being murdered in front of you. We fire three full clips at the perpetrator, but plot armour renders them invincible.

CCTV cameras. More involved are the circuit puzzles you solve to bypass security on a door or alarm system, though even these are just simple lock-and-key conundrums, just with multiples of each in play.

These interactions are simple because the story demands it: special-forces soldiers don't struggle to pick a lock. You are Ryan Marks, a retired member of the SAS who gets sucked into a gangland drama after the death of his father, who was an underworld kingpin. No sooner is his body in the ground than a rival firm makes a move on the family business, and only you, as Marks, can see them and their mysterious backers off. Pre-release, the natural comparison was the work of Guy Richie, and there are enough instances of 'fack' here to back it up. But it lacks the absurdist wit of the Lock, Stock director at his best. The readier comparison is the work of Jason Statham: Marks is a reluctant hero in a war he did not ask for, but is bloody well going to win.

The developer has always downplayed the Richie association, in fairness, but it has played up a comparison to John Wick. While the tricks you can perform using the Move controls – a gunslinger's pistol twirl, say, or the ability to throw a clip in the air then jam the chamber down on it for a snazzy reload – aren't quite the equal of the reference material, the game gets a lot closer during the on-rails set-pieces that close out many of its missions. Here the standard click-to-move navigation is abandoned as Marks auto-sprints his way out through dozens of grunts; all you need to do is aim, fire and reload from time to time. It's more than a little silly – a lack of head-bob, no doubt due to comfort concerns, makes you feel like you're riding a shopping trolley – but these sections provide some of the game's most memorable moments, especially when they end with you jumping off a ledge just before a building collapses, or out of a window into the London night before a minigun cuts you down.

There are problems, most of them caused by the ageing tech in the PS Move controllers. Sudden tracking problems leave your hands in the wrong places, and given that hands is all you are – Marks' body is not represented in-game – that's jarring in the extreme. During the frequent climbing sections (sometimes up a sheer wall, at many others along monkey bars) the game often misreads our inputs or even desyncs entirely, one of the only causes of nausea in an otherwise highly comfortable game. We've had a few hard crashes, too.

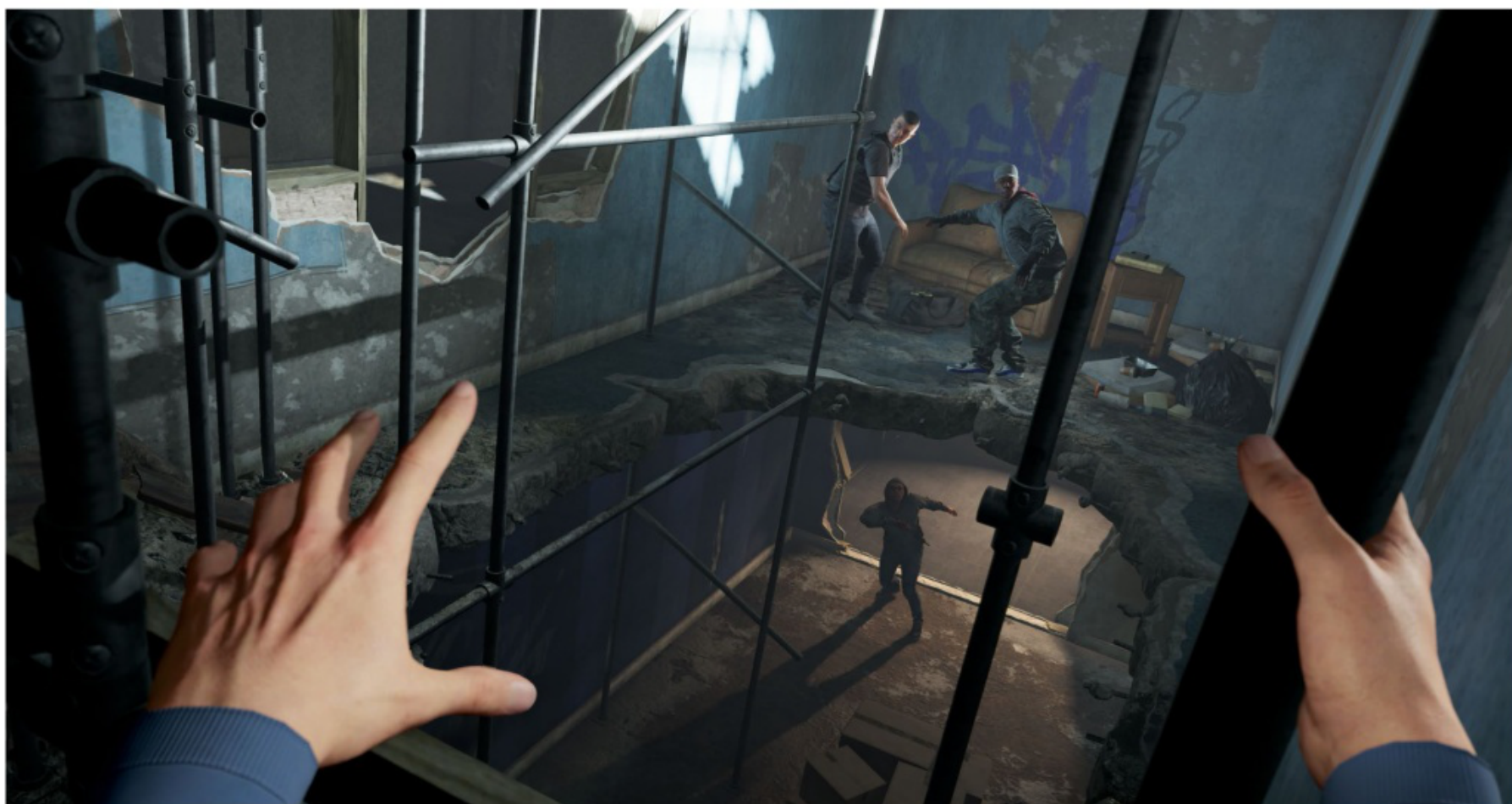
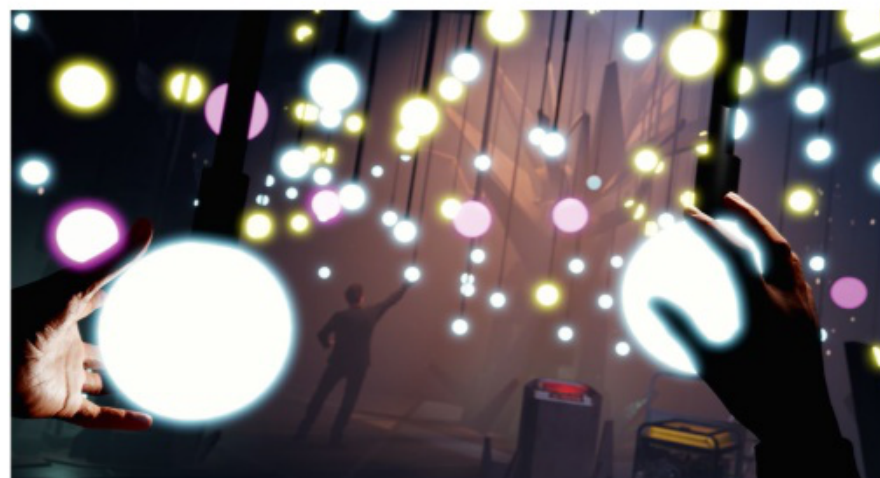
But the whole thing is such *fun*, and any lingering concerns melt away as you clear out a plush apartment building with SMG fire while a grime banger thunders out of the nearby speaker system. Despite the big budget, SIE London Studio has approached *Blood & Truth* with a modest ambition: to make you feel special, and strong, and more than a little silly, in a love letter to the city it calls home. It has done so with a flourish.



LEFT The game opens with Marks at work for the SAS in what feels like a very deliberate *Call Of Duty* nod.
BELOW An infiltration to an art gallery owned by the antagonist lets London Studio run riot with Move-powered distractions. Raising and lowering these bulbs alters a pumping electronic soundtrack.
MAIN While we play the whole game as loud as we can, there are plenty of opportunities for stealth. Throughout, London Studio tempts you out of the shadows by leaving weapon pickups all over the shop



ABOVE Big-picture exposition comes from interviews with a CIA agent, played by Brosnan-era Bond actor Charles Salmon. Since you're seated, he's one of the few characters in the game who appears taller than 5'4



Astrologaster

Heavens above, not *another* Elizabethan astrological satire. Nyamnyam's follow-up to 2014's *Tengami* is based on the casebooks of real-life charlatan Simon Forman, who declared he would cure plague-ridden Londoners by reading their stars and prescribing dubious homebrew remedies. As Forman, you follow star charts to advise a variety of patients – from hypochondriacs to professional widows – helping them with a range of maladies through to more personal issues and predictions via a combination of logic and guesswork. With medical authorities closing in, you need to earn eight letters of recommendation from your clients to become officially recognised as a physician.

These exchanges take the form of lightly animated but otherwise static conversations presented in the style of an artisanal pop-up book – to the point where you're sporadically invited to 'turn the page' by clicking the mouse and dragging it to the left. That probably makes more sense on mobile, and certainly did in *Tengami* – and it's curiously at odds with the game's theatrical leanings, with each character introduced by a chorus and frequent references to the stage. It's a pity, too, that clicking to skip through dialogue can result in the (fully voiced) lines playing over one another.

Paying attention to characters as a game mechanic? It might just catch on, you know. You'll occasionally be tested on what you've picked up while stargazing, though it doesn't seem to affect the story either way

Developer/publisher Nyamnyam
Format iOS, PC (tested)
Release Out now



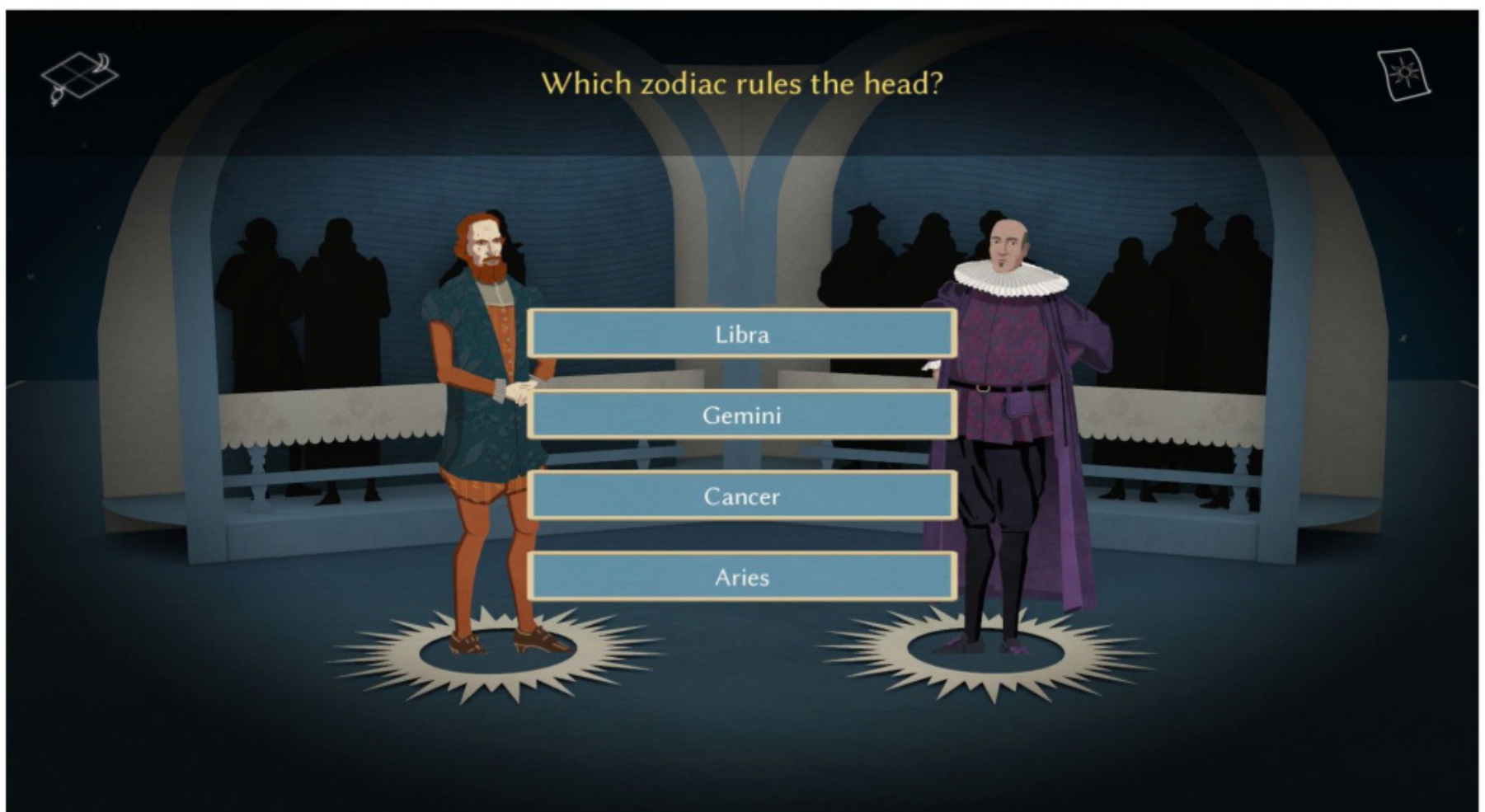
TREASON AND PLOT

A familiarity with late 16th- and early 17th-century history is handy, not only so you can smirk at the subtler references, but to better advise certain patients. Most of it is common knowledge – when one patient asks you about the motives of a group of troublemakers by the Thames, you need only check the date. Elsewhere, it's best not to get Robert Devereux's hopes up when he enquires about his chances of reaching the throne – unless you're close to getting his letter of recommendation.

Not that you'll want to hurry things. *Astrologaster's* script is a treat, its combination of barbed wit and suggestive humour bearing comparison to *Blackadder*. It pokes fun at famous figures – Shakespeare is a target – but it's never too clever-clever about its historical in-jokes. Nor is it afraid to pluck the low-hanging fruit, with an impressive commitment to single- and double-entendres and plenty of amusing euphemisms for bodily excretions: one outbreak of "violent purging" after a dinner-party gaffe is a highlight. The performances are excellent, with special mention to David Jones as the mercurial Forman. And thanks to Nyamnyam, "cluster-shambles" has entered the **Edge** lexicon.

For all the gags, *Astrologaster* is a romp with no little substance. It downplays the notion that these dilemmas are puzzles to solve; that may sound unsatisfying, yet boiling down your role to a combination of guesswork and the equivalent of a coin toss is entirely in keeping with Forman's quackery. There's room for reflection, as you deliberate whether to tell a patient what they want to hear – thus putting you a step closer to one of those crucial letters – or to adopt a more progressive approach, such as encouraging a male actor cast in female roles to protest for equal pay. And in these credulous querents and their overlapping stories, it has something timely to say about prejudice and confirmation bias. It's anything but a cluster-shambles.

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Shakedown: Hawaii

Just as the Bolivian government got stroppy about the country's portrayal in *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*, it's fair to say the Hawaiian tourist board won't be writing a thank-you letter to Brian Provinciano anytime soon. His follow-up to *Retro City Rampage* paints the island as a hive of hooligans and delinquents, gangs and maniacs – and, more pertinently, deeply unscrupulous CEOs looking to revive their flagging empires through exploitative (if not wholly illegal) practices.

You are one such businessman, a greying, pot-bellied suit who uses news stories about local crime as business plans: after a bulletin exposes a repossession racket, he heads out to jack a car and re-lease it, setting up the first of a series of lucrative income opportunities in an aggressive expansion across Hawaii. What follows is basically *GTA* if it existed in the Mega Drive era, though the range (and brevity) of its missions often makes it feel more like *WarioWare* with a plot. You'll shake down small businesses to bolster your income, burn down markets with flamethrowers to boost nearby property values and hop over the border to play a Mexican associate who 'recovers' farms from the local cartels.

As a satire of capitalism, it's effective if heavy-handed. Your get-rich-quick schemes are frequently

It's hard not to bump into traffic on these roads, though it's relatively easy to give the police the slip if they see you cause an accident. You can nip into a garage for a respray, or outrun them if you're driving something fast

Developer/publisher
VBlank Entertainment
Format PC (tested), PS4, Switch, Vita
Release Out now



ALOHA THE BOOM

Outside the story mode you'll find a selection of short high-score challenges, with medal targets in each to beat. In one you'll smash crates to collect as many coins as you can, while another asks you to crush cars with a monster truck. Some are trickier than they look: running over gang members in a station wagon may be straightforward enough, sure, but keeping the vehicle intact for the duration is another matter. You can save up to ten action replays of your most explosive rampages.

scuppered, but ultimately your empire will grow, as will your profits. Through its property management systems, it allows you to indulge in gentrification – buy groups of houses to create a shortage and the prices increase. With hired lobbyists and clickbait ads acting as profit multipliers, your income soon spirals upward, giving you yet more money to buy costlier businesses and gradually make the entire island your own. If its endgame feels like a hollow victory, that's because it's supposed to.

It would be the feelbad game of the year if it weren't so grimly funny. Provinciano takes aim at everything from the price of HD movies to targeted web ads, lootboxes, day-one patches and the rebranding racket that is 'superfoods'. Its bluntness makes Rockstar look like Dorothy Parker, but it boasts an appealingly silly streak, with its rhythm-action glute workouts and tawdry gameshow auditions. Even its standard missions throw up entertaining twists: one shakedown has you stuffing paper towels down a toilet to clog up the pipes.

Save for a quite brilliant soundtrack there's no one standout element, though the non-stop pace gives it a moreish momentum. Whether its lack of challenge is an attempt to say something about the nonexistent hurdles faced by the mega-rich is anyone's guess. Either way, we're hardly complaining – a sandbox where waypoint distances are measured in pixels, and journeys are over in seconds, is surely one worth celebrating.

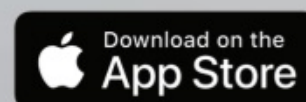
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Dragon's Dogma

The cult fantasy RPG that found its
own weird path to adventure

By ROBIN VALENTINE

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Developer/publisher Capcom Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Switch, Xbox One Release 2012

Like its cyclical fantasy world, *Dragon's Dogma* has lived many lives. First released for PS3 and Xbox 360 in 2012, it was then re-released on those same consoles, updated and expanded, as *Dark Arisen* in 2013. In 2016 it returned with a PC port, then again for PS4 and Xbox One in 2017, and, most recently, it came to Switch in April of this year. That its cult success endures to this day is testament to its wonderful, singular strangeness.

On the surface, it appears a rote open-world action RPG, Japanese developer Capcom aping Western ideas and Tolkienesque fantasy. Dig deeper, however, and you discover something far more distinct and alluring. Capcom had its own vision for what a game like this could be: something built on turning left wherever its contemporaries turn right.

At its core, it's about journeys – long, hard treks across its sprawling kingdom. It's about learning the landscape around you, managing dwindling supplies and the moment of relief when, after days on the road, you finally spot civilisation on the horizon. It's not afraid to inconvenience players in favour of giving its world and its quests a greater sense of scale. And it's not afraid to be scary – not simply hostile or difficult, but dangerous. Thanks to a brilliantly unfriendly lighting system, nights are pitch-black. Even with a light source, navigation after sundown is terrifying, as you stumble through trees and scrub pursued by predators who only wake in the darkness. Its caves and dungeons aren't simply handfuls of fights and stashes of treasure; they're lairs. Exploring their cramped, lightless tunnels is an exercise in tension and release as you creep forward, pushing your luck ever further, before a great beast erupts from the shadows and smears you across the walls.

Dragon's Dogma's threats, especially in the early game, aren't overcome by learning attack patterns, or perfecting the use of your abilities. The combat is, ultimately, too loose for that. The challenge isn't to master fighting; it's to learn the rules and whims of the world. You didn't die in the dungeon because you dodged at the wrong moment.

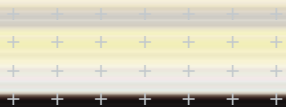
You shouldn't have entered the dungeon at all, not weak and undersupplied and unseasoned as you were.

The game does recognise this is a world where you need help, not just for protection in combat, but to explain your environment. It provides an adventuring party in the form of Pawns, fellow travellers with a strange connection to your quest. Instead of being authored characters or generic hirelings, each is a player's creation. You make one yourself, to serve as your consistent sidekick, but to round out your foursome you pull two in from other people's games before each excursion. And others can hire your Pawn too. Whatever game they're battling in, Pawns are always learning, gaining knowledge of the land and its creatures – so by adventuring with others, when it returns yours might know the weaknesses of a monster you've not yet fought, or a shortcut in a quest you've yet to complete. They may even return with a gift granted for good service, a star rating for their appearance, service in battle and helpfulness, and a comment on their performance – like some kind of interdimensional Yelp review.

The result is that it's in every player's interest for their Pawn to be picked as often as possible, creating a sort of community popularity contest. Some latch onto the purity of numbers, creating the most mechanically adept Pawn they can, and trusting others to know a min-maxed build when they see it. For others, it's a fashion contest, where the game's versatile character-creation tools and modular outfits are used to create striking heroes (and, it must be admitted, scantily clad maidens). For some, it's a chance to recreate characters from popular culture, allowing players to hire rough simulacra of Hulk, Gollum and Homer Simpson. And it can even be an avenue for the kind of absurdist humour only character-creation sliders can facilitate: red dwarves with pink ponytails, warped parodies of political figures, malnourished eight-foot jesters and odder besides.

So, while they might not be scripted, they take on a personality regardless, because of their connection to the creativity and experiences of others – or, in the case of your Pawn, because of the life it seems ►

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to lead even when you're not playing. It greets you after your time away having grown and prospered in other people's games, perhaps even returning with a few oddly warming comments, messages from people whose journey your creation enhanced in some way.

The romance system is imbued with a similar kind of organic magic. Where in the games of BioWare, CD Projekt Red and countless imitators, love is something achieved by selecting clearly signposted conversation options, and rewarded with a saucy cutscene, *Dragon's Dogma* tries something characteristically experimental. Fascinatingly, the game attempts to infer which of its many NPCs you like best, based on how you interact with them – and this invisible companionship tally is kept for



him than you ever did her. But for many, it must be admitted, their true love turned out to be the weapons merchant. 'Well, you spend so much time with him,' the game seems to say with a sudden naivety. 'He's always the first person you run to. Isn't it because you love his smile?'

It's a moment that kicks off the beginning of the end of the story. Its twists and turns are too numerous and bizarre to

The game's monsters draw as much on classical mythology as traditional fantasy – you'll face chimeras, hydras and cyclopes on your journey

THE GAME ATTEMPTS TO INFER WHICH OF ITS MANY NPCs YOU LIKE BEST, BASED ON HOW YOU INTERACT WITH THEM

almost every character you meet (notably regardless of gender). This enormously complex system exists not for the gratification of bedding virtual constructs, but to pull the rug out from under you. At a key moment in the story, you're told the Dragon, the game's main antagonist, has kidnapped your true love. You rush to confront it and, like a magician showing you your card, the game reveals who it thinks you've fallen for.

Of course, the nature of experiments is that their results are unpredictable, and never is that clearer than in this vital instant. For some players, it is a moment of true emotional impact, as a character they consciously pursued is put in danger. For others, it's strangely revelatory – maybe you thought it would be this person, but you actually spent far more time trying to please

fully explore here, but suffice to say they see your character both metaphorically and literally descending into an increasingly surreal world, long past the point you would have expected things to wind to a close with medals all round. In its final moments, you discover the truth: your entire adventure was a test, put into motion by 'the Seneschal' (to all intents and purposes, God) to determine whether you are worthy to take his place. Beat him in combat, and you gain his power. Following your ascension, you are shown the extent of your abilities. The world, once so dark and dangerous, is now your playground. As an invisible, untouchable presence, you are free to go anywhere you please, do anything you want.

Except there's nothing of consequence left for you to do. Where once you were the world's one driving agent, now you are the



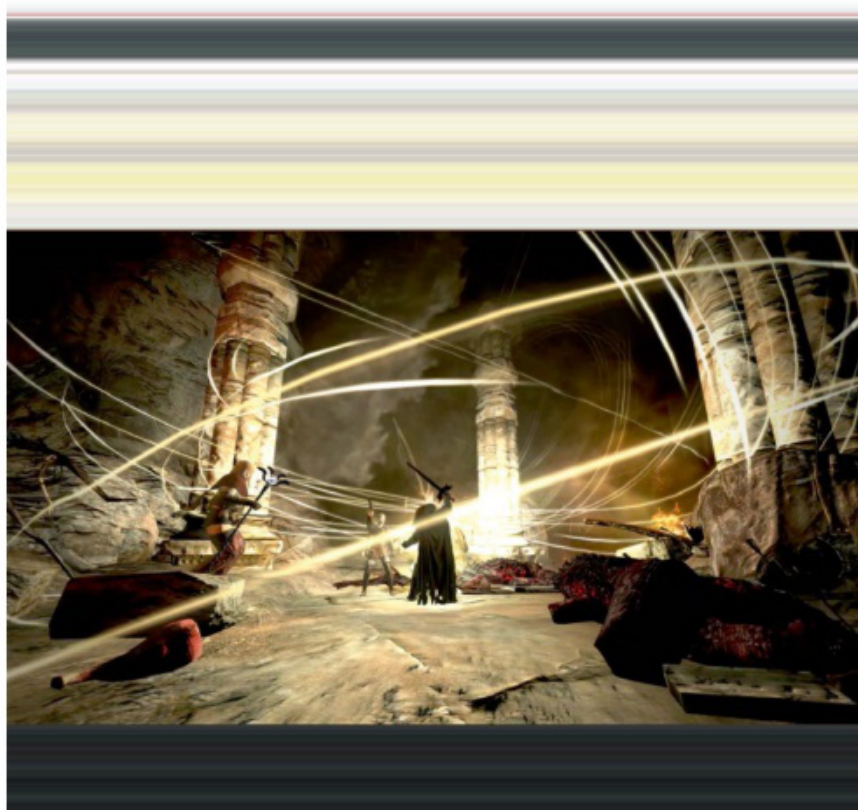
This is one of the few games where you're likely to spend more time creating your companion than your hero



RISE & FALL

For the most part, *Dark Arisen* (the version released on current-gen consoles) is a highly improved experience, full of both major updates and more subtle tweaks, and featuring a substantial new area to explore. But it's not without its quirks. For one, it makes fast travel far easier. We'd actually recommend dumping the free teleportation stone you're given, as while it may make your journeys quicker and more convenient, it undercuts some of the atmosphere and significance of travel, one of the game's more distinctive elements. You also start with an inventory stuffed full of strange outfits, including a hideous princess gown that, in terms of pure stats, outranks most actual armour. That's why you'll find so many Pawns dressed as bright pink royalty.

In an awkward but endearing tribute to *Shadow Of The Colossus*, you can climb onto larger enemies and strike at their weak spots



Magic feels very different than in most RPGs – spells are hugely powerful and destructive, but take a long time to successfully charge up and cast

passive observer of a land in stasis, waiting for a new hero. You are allowed as much time as you need to come to the same realisation the Seneschal did: that godhood is a curse, not a blessing. When you finally bore of the novelty, your only option is to end your own existence, killing yourself and starting the cycle anew via the game's esoteric New Game Plus mode.

How coherent any of this is is up for debate, but there's a wonderful boldness in a game even attempting such an existentially disturbing ending. Having played with the power fantasy inherent to the RPG genre – sometimes quashing it, sometimes indulging in it – the game ends by taking it to its most absurd extreme, allowing you to fight God for His loot, and ultimately discover it worthless.

We haven't even delved into the game's transitory progression system that sees you

passing through its classes one after another; the effect of weight and height on gameplay, including the secret places only tiny heroes can reach; the endgame boss so powerful only the entire community united can defeat it; and countless other moments of strangeness that make *Dragon's Dogma* feel not quite of this world.

Perhaps understandably, it's a game that's inspired no imitators, and despite its enduring presence and cult success, it's yet to generate a sequel. Japanese players at least can enjoy an MMO spin-off, *Dragon's Dogma Online*, though it shows no sign yet of making its way to the west. A brief glimmer of hope sparkled at 2013's E3 with the announcement of *Deep Down*, seemingly a spiritual successor – but, save for a trademark extension in 2018, that project has shown few signs of activity since.

In fact, the only confirmed follow-up *Dragon's Dogma* has on the cards isn't a game at all: it's an animated Netflix television series currently in production at CG studio Sublimation. Perhaps that's appropriately idiosyncratic for a game so devoted to the art of going its own way – but we can't imagine it's lived its last life just yet. Its director, Hideaki Itsuno, hasn't given up hope of a followup, at least, revealing to Eurogamer earlier this year that he'd still love to helm a sequel one day. "I already know what the story would be," he said. "It's just about convincing people to let me make it." Perhaps, if the stars align, we may yet get see the cycle begin anew. ■



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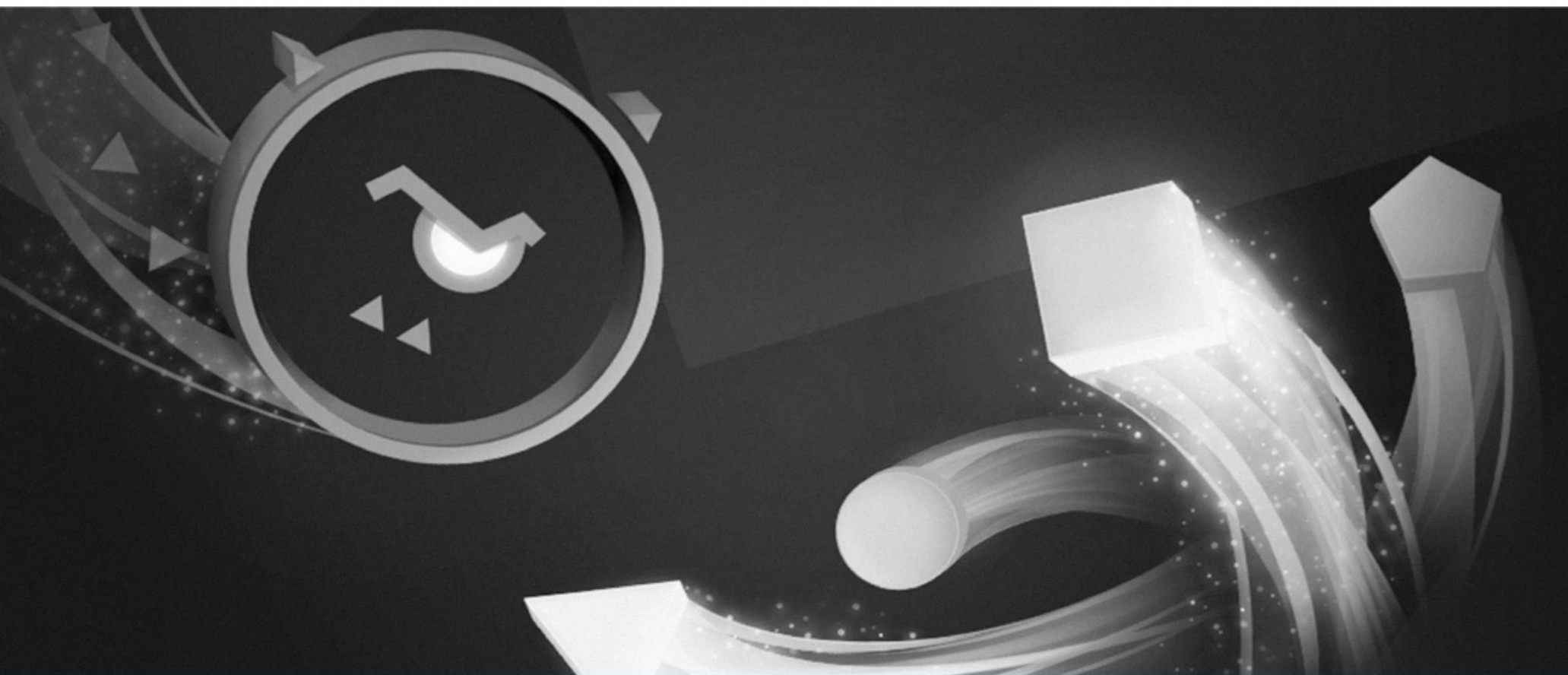
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A progress report on the games we just can't quit



Just Shapes & Beats

Developer/publisher Berzerk Studio Format PC, PS4, Switch Release 2018

Set to the bouncy chiptune of Danimal Cannon's Long Live The New Fresh, *Just Shapes & Beats'* opening boss fight starts predictably enough: the tutorial prepares you for a musical bullet hell in which you must dodge pink shapes using only a thumbstick and an invincible dash. A circle spews spiky pellets – at the drop, it suddenly transforms into a monster, sprouting rocket-powered arms all the better to batter you with. It's a moment that crystallises what some of the greatest masocore games have in common: the element of surprise.

But the thrill doesn't last. Mastering these games, whether it's a platformer, a combat challenge or a bullet hell, demands three things: memorisation, execution and a little bit of cheese. You repeat a stage over and over, learning patterns, perfecting timing and figuring out safe spots. Eventually, you enter a zen state where the chaos on the screen takes a backseat to what's happening in your own head. The game changes from palm-moistening challenge to relaxing pastime. A favourite level becomes almost like playing a beloved tune on the piano.

At the beginning of the year, *Just Shapes & Beats* did the equivalent of moving all the keys up one space, via an update that – among adding other things such as faster retry and extra levels – slightly changed the

position of obstacles in certain levels. Termination Shock's retooled slingshot pillars mean we can't hide in the bottom-right corner of the screen any more, and the tiny adjustment to the pillars in the last phase confuses our muscle memory: we have to learn how to shimmy to the beat, on top of avoiding pellets. It's infuriating, but an improvement, further syncing our movements with the music rather than letting us rest.

The Hardcore Mode update (released first on PS4 but since made available on other platforms) has taken a sledgehammer to the piano keys. Each of the 39 levels has received an even more fiendish variant, with different obstacles, larger bullets and increased speed. Spectra, once a sedate jam session, has become a desperate dash for space, while the addition of a buzzsaw inside the rolling cog in the Close To Me boss fight is pure evil.

The exhilaration is back. Soon enough, we'll comb it into zen-like patterns again with the rake of our skill. It's refreshing to get another chance at that cycle: while it'd be significantly more complicated to alter levels in the similarly charismatic *Cuphead*, *Just Shapes & Beats'* purity means it can be revived with relative ease, giving us more deliciously nasty surprises to sink our teeth into – a great model for the future of masocore. Long live the new fresh, indeed. ■

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